

ARUNDHATI ROY ON INDIA'S TRAIL OF TEARS

FEBRUARY 2010

IN THESE TIMES

OMG, are
Millennials **cursed**?

FEMA concentration
camps, **WTF!**

SLEAZY GROW HOUSES!

REEFER ECONOMICS

BY MICHAEL POLSON

THE **DEVIL** TENDS
HIS **GARDEN** IN
CALIFORNIA!



PLUS

- Funny Arabs
- A gay Ugandan speaks out

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People's America

I have read G. William Domhoff's prescription for progressive change and I believe his solution would do the job—but it's not going to happen ("The L Words," January 2009). The only way corporate power will end and progressive change will dominate is when more than 80 percent of the people are suffering like those now on the economic bottom. We haven't reached that stage yet, but we will eventually.

The last time we had enough public response to effectively change policy was during the Vietnam fiasco. The draft of the sons of the middle class and a few of the wealthy along with their needless deaths hit the general population with adequate rage to effect positive change. With today's volunteer army, the general public doesn't have the same concern.

The key for getting enough public response to rid us of Corporate America is by challenging the Supreme Court's ruling that bribing Congress with campaign funds is free

speech and constitutional. The bulk of Americans will understand bribery of congressmen if they are constantly made aware that huge campaign funds most certainly affect the way Congress votes.

When they realize have been snookered, Americans will be outraged more than enough to ensure a People's America. Case closed.

*Stewart MacMillan
Dexter, New York*

"The L Words" ironically presented the catechism of faux leftist losers everywhere. We don't need more of this drisk delivered in *In These Times* by two talking heads who could have been on CNN. Lemming liberals and pretendgressives show their hand by their acceptance of things as they are: a two-party shell game run by corporate cash, where progressive politics go to die. Real progressives and liberals do not accept the world as it is, but challenge it. Too bad *In These Times* chooses to be part of the chorus calling us back to the corporate fold of the misnamed Democratic Party.

*Daniel Raphael
Portland, Oregon*

Starbucking ridiculous

"Our Coffee, Ourselves" (January 2009) suffers from exactly the same thing it claims is at the heart of Starbucks success: "style, status, identity and aspiration."

Some people just can't put Starbucks into perspective: it's a decent place to get a cup of coffee, with comfortable

seats, far better than usual decor and Wi-Fi. If somehow Richard Greenwald was expecting more and is disappointed and therefore angry, he has only himself to blame.

Starbucks has made a significant contribution—added thousands of "third places"—and the article both acknowledges that as a positive and then tears it down with a lot of high-sounding pretentious language because it spread third places to locations that never had them,

like shopping centers and strip malls, and because it isn't the hippy-dippy coffee house with guys in black turtlenecks and berets they remember from the Doby Gillis show.

Some people are just never satisfied, and the author of this review (and book) seems to be one of them.

This creepy article/book attempts to tear down one of the few genuine successes of mass-market capitalism.

*David Sucher
InTheseTimes.com*



Six months after its launch, Working In These Times—our blog dedicated to covering the labor movement and workers' struggles in the United States and abroad—is going strong. Updated throughout each work day with articles by regulars like Senior Editor David Moberg and Contributing Editor Kari Lydersen, WorkingInTheseTimes.com mixes coverage of the latest protests and strikes with incisive analysis. Recent top stories include:

- Akito Yoshikane on why the United Nations declared 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives.
- Art Levine on unions' eleventh-hour push to remove the "Cadillac" insurance tax from the final healthcare reform bill.
- More than one year after the Republic Windows and Doors factory occupation, Roger Bybee looks at why the successful action failed to inspire similar events in the United States, even as European workers aggressively pursued their interests.
- Michelle Chen on the promises and perils of microfinancing, which aims to help the poor through small-scale lending.

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Rachel K. Jefferson

Who Really Won in 2008?

THE VOTERS WHO made Barack Obama's historic election possible rightly expected far-reaching policy change. Yet what they have gotten is the same old corporate-driven politics.

Frustrated Obama supporters are told that the "machinery of Congress" grinds slowly; that only incremental change is possible; and that folks on "the left" are demanding too much and letting "the perfect be the enemy of the good." Thus, we get a healthcare bill that rewards a predatory insurance system with millions of new customers—at taxpayer expense.

Apparently, it is paranoid to suspect that undue corporate influence might account for the rejection of demonstrably reliable governmental underwriting of healthcare. We are told the gradual degrading and then jettisoning of the public option and the proposed Medicare expansion—not to mention exclusion of single-payer from debate—is just a part of legislative deal-making.

But, delivering billions of taxpayer dollars to a monopolistic industry by forcing millions of people to purchase its product—with no option to join a public plan—is not inevitable. Nor is it good politics. How will Democrats defend forcing people to buy such tainted goods?

In recent weeks, some Democratic pundits have sought to silence the left. Instead of encouraging progressives to heed the example Obama himself once set as a community organizer, they countenance the sacrifice of core liberal principles such as reproductive rights, corporate accountability and inclusion of immigrants.

Writing in *The New Republic*, editor Jonathan Chait grumbled that progressives have an "irrational attachment to the public plan" and that criticism of Obama reflects the "bizarre convergence of left-wing and right-wing paranoia."

Obama, in his September 9 address to

Congress, also propagated this false parallel between left and right opponents when he decried the "unyielding ideological camps that offer no hope of compromise." He even assigned motive to critics, saying they have "used this as an opportunity to score short-term political points."

In other words, the President represents the "sensible center." The left—those who demand a healthcare program that does not further enrich greedy insurance companies—are the extremists. The center is occupied by the likes of Sens Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) and Ben Nelson (D-Neb.), who would hold hostage millions of uninsured in order to protect corporate profits. The center belongs to conservatives such as Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich.), whose obsession with abortion trumps any concern for the 45,000 people who die every year for lack of health insurance.

By reducing left-right differences on healthcare to merely "unyielding ideological camps," the president and his defenders ignore the deep moral divide between progressives and conservatives. The left's push for universal healthcare is grounded in the long-held principle of social justice, the same one that produced the New Deal, gave us Medicare in 1965 and ushered in a new era in civil rights.

Instead of dismissing progressives and apologizing for the President, Beltway liberals could have led the charge to dismantle the structurally conservative elements of our political system, from the undemocratic filibuster to the undue influence of corporate money in elections. Further, since progressives, liberals, the left—whatever we are calling ourselves—support universal healthcare, let us from now on, together, create a national echo chamber around "Medicare For All." If this had been our collective mantra for the last 15 years, we would be in a better place today, and perhaps more unified.

—James Thindwa

IN THESE TIMES

"With liberty and justice for all..."

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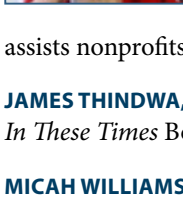
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mixed reaction

JUST THE FACTS



150 Tons of marijuana seized by the DEA in 2008

202,416 Number of medical marijuana "patients" in California

27,023 Number of registered medical marijuana "patients" in California

2,100 Number of "cannabis-business" dispensaries in California, more than all the Starbucks, McDonald's, and 7-11's in the state combined

“Connections become difficult to perceive, owing to the frequently sudden rupture of all memory of past events, thought is not formed into words, the situation can become so compulsively hilarious that the hashish eater for minutes on end is capable of nothing except laughing.”

—ERNST JOEL AND FRITZ FRANKEL, "DER HASCHISCH-RAUSCH," ["THE HASHISH TRIIP,"] KLINISCHE WOCHENSCHRIFT, 1926

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



QUID PRO QUO

THE QUID:

Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.) is the Senate's most outspoken critic of climate change science and legislation. As the ranking Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, he spouts global warming denialism on a regular basis. Most recently, Inhofe described global warming as a "hoax" and said climate change science reminded him of "the Third Reich, the Big Lie."

THE QUO:

It must be a coincidence that four of his top five contributors since 2005—Koch Industries, Murray Energy, Devon Energy and OGE Energy—are all oil and gas companies.

Inhofe, who compares the EPA to the Gestapo, has received more money from the oil and gas sector than from any other industry—\$429,950 since 2005. The senator's number three contributor, the electrical utilities



industry, isn't far behind. It has given him \$206,654 in the same period. Yep, total coincidence.



Former workers of the national Luz y Fuerza del Centro electricity agency, their relatives and supporters protest against the closure of the state-run power company on Reforma Avenue in Mexico City on November 11.

ALFREDO ESTRELLA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Labor's Last Stand?

A grassroots movement grows after Mexico shuts down a national electric company

BY MICAH WILLIAMS

MEXICO CITY—FOLLOWING THE SURPRISE liquidation order of a state-owned electrical utility and the firing of 44,000 electricians, Mexico could face an assault on unionism as President Felipe Calderón's administration seeks to remove barriers to corporate profits and privatize nationalized electricity and oil industries.

On October 11, Calderón unexpectedly ordered the elimination of one of Mexico's two nationalized electricity companies, Central Light and Power (Luz y Fuerza del Centro). Claiming operations left an "untenable financial situation," 44,000 unionized workers were unceremoniously fired, their work sites occupied by federal police in riot gear.

Luz y Fuerza employees were members of the Mexican Electricians Union (SME), the country's fiercely independent and democratic union. Many see the firings as an effort to break SME and depose a longtime barrier to privatization of the country's electrical grid.

Civil society has joined the union in the streets, with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in Mexico City demanding the liquidation's reversal. On November 11, protests and highway blockades paralyzed the world's third largest city for a day, an event called "unprecedented" in Mexican history by the daily newspaper *La Jornada*.

On December 4, SME members and their supporters filled the huge plaza

surrounding the Monument to the Revolution to again demand their rehiring. Union leaders called for a general strike in early 2010.

Organizers billed the December 4 protest as a symbolic "taking of Mexico City," echoing the actions of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican Revolution a century ago.

Alejandro García traveled 10 hours from the southeastern state of Chiapas with 60 carloads of poor farmers for the rally. SME's elimination, he says, is a move toward selling the country's electricity to foreign corporations. "SME's fight is our fight," he says. "They want to privatize everything in the country. To do that, they first need to eliminate the union. But the electricity is ours, and we are obligated to defend it—and SME."

Calderón's move has drawn comparisons to Ronald Reagan's 1981 firing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). In that year, more than 11,000 controllers struck for better working conditions. Citing an anti-strike law for public employees, Reagan promised to fire workers refusing to return to work within 48 hours. The strikers stayed out, and Reagan followed through, axing the controllers and blacklisting them from federal employment for life.

The firing was a turning point for American labor. The tepid response by the AFL-CIO under the leadership of Lane Kirkland paved the way for future attacks on the union movement and its past victories. The same could happen in Mexico.

"We've never seen such a strong attack on a nationalized industry," said Francisco Retama, union adviser for the Center for Labor Investigation and Union Counsel, a Mexico City labor think tank. "They want to deepen the application of the neoliberal model, setting the stage for larger privatization and labor reform." The latter, currently being discussed in Congress, would weaken Mexico's worker protection laws.

But unlike Americans following the PATCO strike, Mexicans have rallied behind SME. "A large sector of the public identifies with this struggle," Retama says.

VIRTUAL CLIMATE CHANGE

Following the failure of world leaders in Copenhagen to establish international legal commitments to decrease greenhouse gases, it's hard to see where progress will come from.

The Waxman-Markey Climate Bill, which increases funding for renewable energy resource research, cleared the House last year, but is on hold in the Senate. Greenpeace's Executive Director Phil Radford labeled the bill "toothless."

It seems the only way forward is through sustained citizen action.

It's Getting Hot In Here is an online community dedicated to mobilizing and educating youth about how to stop climate change by creating a place to organize and share ideas. Founded by youth leaders as a tool for reporting from the Montreal climate talks in 2005, the website now features more than 300 writers from around the world.

Edited by young activists, *ItsGettingHotInHere.org* functions as a kind of national Craigslist for environmental career and action opportunities, in addition to providing blog posts and articles on today's climate news. To promote restrictions to help bring the atmosphere's concentration of carbon dioxide down to 350 parts-per-million, the website recently published photos from a petition taken in locations around the world, like the one below.

To get involved or to find out more, visit ItsGettingHotInHere.org.

—Diana Novak



"They support an organization directly linked to the nationalized electricity."

The struggle, Retama says, is part of a larger shift in Mexico: "The [neoliberal] Washington Consensus has been put into question."

Many see the SME firings as a test case for eventual privatization of Pemex, the country's state-owned oil company.

As time goes on, a workers' victory appears slimmer. On December 11, a federal judge ruled the extinction constitutional. (The union plans to appeal.) Electricians' calls for dialogue with the government have been met with officials' foot-dragging, and Secretary of Labor Javier Lozano has ruled out reversing the elimination order. SME, in turn, has retreated from an initial demand to rehire all 44,000 electricians as part of Luz y Fuerza, instead pushing for 20,000 to be employed by the Federal Electrical Commission (CFE), the country's other state electrical utility.

Yet a general strike early in 2010 remains a possibility. On December 22, the union announced a national campaign urging citizens to refuse to pay their electrical bills. And in early December, representatives from American and Canadian unions traveled south to pledge support to SME.

Currently, CFE's office entrance is occupied by unionists and their supporters. The site of a 17-day hunger strike in November and December by 15 SME members, it remains a rallying point for electricians demanding their jobs back.

Ana Lucia Segovia, an electrician of 21 years who is now jobless, stood with her two children next to a banner declaring the space "SME Territory." She summed up SME members' sentiments: "We'll keep fighting until the end, because we have nothing left to lose." ■

States of Pain

LAST SEPTEMBER, FEDERAL Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke declared, "From a technical perspective, the recession is very likely over." But he also acknowledged that the damage wrought by the economic downturn would result in additional pain for a long time to come.

Nowhere else is this more apparent than



Cal State University students who can't enroll due to budget cuts lodge complaints with the California state legislature.

in the slow-motion catastrophe unfolding in state legislatures across the nation, where dwindling tax receipts are forcing many states to confront massive budget deficits that threaten to undermine crucial public services and the fragile economic recovery now underway.

According to recent reports by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the states can expect to experience a combined budget deficit of \$350 billion for fiscal years 2010 and 2011. Even though the broad economic picture is improving, the CBPP expects that fiscal year 2011, which begins in July 2010, will be even worse. The fiscal assistance that states received from Washington under President Obama's stimulus package is scheduled to end on December 31, 2010. In the absence of further relief, states would be forced to make painful budget cuts that the CBPP estimates "will take nearly a full percentage point off the Gross Domestic Product" and "cost the economy 900,000 jobs."

California's struggles with fiscal crisis are well-known, but every state other than Montana and North Dakota is facing deficits of varying severity. This includes economically important states like Michigan, New Jersey, Illinois, Florida and New York, all of which are in the grip of an extraordinary fiscal peril that threatens the health of the national economy.

As the home of Wall Street, the Empire State contains the epicenter of the Great Recession, but its struggles with budget deficits have largely gone under the radar

in national media.

According to a November report by the Pew Center on the States, "New York's revenue decline was steeper in the first quarter of 2009 than in all but four states, and its fiscal year 2010 budget gap was sixth worse in the nation," a stunning \$3.2 billion. Democratic Governor David Paterson and the state legislature adopted a mid-year budget plan in early December to reduce the gap by about \$2.8 billion. It included cuts to various state agencies, a \$391 million infusion of federal stimulus funds originally intended for use in next year's budget, and the creation of a new classification that would reduce pension benefits for future unionized public employees, among other measures.

Doubling down on his vow to "mortgage my political career" on wielding the budget axe, in late December Paterson took the unprecedented step of withholding \$750 million in payments to New York municipalities and schools in order to fill a \$600 million gap in its general operating fund. The move provoked opposition from

Democrats in the state legislature as well as local school boards and New York's main teachers' union, which has sued the state. It claims that Paterson's actions are unconstitutional under New York law. A hearing on the suit is scheduled for January 20.

The budget deficits in New York and other states do need to be brought under control. But is the slash-and-burn approach championed by Paterson and austerity advocates from both parties the only option? James Parrott, Deputy Director and Chief Economist of New York's labor-oriented Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI), doesn't think so.

"The cuts proposed by Paterson will result in an even worse economy with higher unemployment and greater hardship among low-income populations," says Parrott. The governor and his allies see supposedly excessive social spending and state employee pay and benefits as the root of the crisis, but according to Parrott, "the real culprit is the recession-related revenue falloff" and "excessive tax cuts in the 1990s that have eroded the state's tax base by

roughly \$20 billion per year."

Instead of painful cuts to public spending, Parrott argues that New York's budget crisis can be solved more soundly and humanely by "pressing for more federal state and local fiscal relief, closing business tax loopholes and curtailing wasteful tax giveaway economic development programs, and increasing reliance on a progressive personal income tax." Although each state has its own unique economic and political conditions, a similar menu of policy proposals could likely be pursued in other states facing serious budget gaps.

The big question is whether or not the political will exists inside the Obama administration to extend federal aid to states beyond the end of the calendar year. The growing federal budget deficit threatens to be an electoral liability for Democrats this fall, and the administration has indicated that federal budget cuts are a real possibility. If help is not offered by Washington, progressives and other opponents of state budget cuts will have to demand it.

—Chris Maisano

DEAR ITT IDEOLOGIST

Dear ITT Ideologist,

As we enter a new year and decade, I wonder if you could put aside ideology for itemology for a moment. In particular, what do you see as the hot new product in our future?

Don Draper, Sterling Cooper Advertising

Dear Mr. Draper,

Happily, my answer does not require me to elide ideology. Both philosophy and product development have lately been informed by what Neoists have dubbed dialectical immaterialism (DI). No, it has nothing to do with Hegel or Marx. It refers to insipid interactions, generally in cyberspace. DI has become the default mode of expression in a society locked into business as usual and no longer able to think outside of its various boxes.

What these boxes contain nowadays are ever lighter devices to match the insubstantiality of the messages they carry. These e-terations of cells, pods, berries and such facilitate DI encounters

that allow one to dispense pointless patter and access flashes of useless information at speeds commensurate with one's memory span. Thus you may instantly inform others that you have found previously unnoticed pizza drippings on your t-shirt while learning the name of the nail polish color favored this week by Adam Lambert.

DI marks a departure from traditional triviality, which diminishes substance to drivel, as typified by Marie-Antoinette's reputed suggestion that if the poor had no bread they should eat Ring Dings. DI, by contrast, avoids substance and treats the meaningless itself trivially (see any interview with Levi Johnston).

Now to answer your question specifically, the next fruit to spill from the cornucopia of consumer technology will be My-Fi, a self-contained version of Wi-Fi that lets you network with



yourself while leaving you free to bubble your lips.

Dear ITT Ideologist,

I've heard that on Wall Street vast sums of money are necessary to inspire the best work by the best people. Is that also the case among ideologists?

Phil T. Lucre, Cayman Islands

Dear Mr. Lucre,

To be sure. I do my best ideologizing in financial institutions. I will go to a bank, nominally to check on my Christmas club account or get a roll of quarters to feed the parking meters. But what I'm really after are insight and inspiration. When a brain wave breaks over me, I quickly jot it down on a deposit slip, having no other use for it. I notice that my ideas improve if the vault happens to be open. Outside of banking hours, I often stand close to an ATM machine to get the old noggin working.

—Pete Karman

snapshot



NAIROBI—On Jan. 5, 2010, Kenyan passengers hang onto an overloaded train, after public transport was paralyzed in Kenyan cities as minibus taxi drivers went on a three-day strike to protest alleged extortion and corruption by Kenyan police. Thousands of workers who rely on the so-called matatus (minibuses) were forced to stay home. Others walked for hours or hitchhiked to work. Officials of the two groups that called the countrywide bus strike were set to meet with Internal Security Minister George Saitoti in an attempt to end the paralyzing protest. (Photo by Simon Maina/AFP/Getty Images)

Same Work, More Play

AFTER WEATHERING A year of economic catastrophe, we could all use a day off...permanently.

That's one idea catching on in some states that may reduce the workweek for government employees to four days. Though long weekends year-round might sound like a gift to slackers, the policy is motivated chiefly by fiscal belt-tightening. In the midst of yawning budget gaps, the truncated workweek is becoming an attractive prospect to cash-strapped states. Earlier this year, the postal service weighed a proposal to shore up its finances by shaving a day off mail carriers' famously stalwart delivery schedule.

One benefit of a "compressed" workweek may be energy savings. Government would use less energy to operate buildings,

and employees save on gas consumed by their daily commute.

Working one less day each week does not, however, necessarily translate into less work. The four-day scheme typically requires employees to work 10-hour days. Utah's 4/10 week, implemented in 2008, appears to be fairly popular with state employees. But the success of any alternative work schedule is always a function of workplace conditions, economic climate and employee motivation.

The longer workday is tied to a decline in overtime hours; employees are presumably eager to escape the office after a 10-hour shift. But does the extra day off balance out the sacrifice? According to a survey analysis of employees by researchers at Brigham Young University, about 80 percent reported having a "positive experience" with the 4/10 week, and more than 60 percent noted "increased productivity."

In February 2009, Utah Governor Jon

Huntsman told National Public Radio that a shortened workweek should be "attractive to anyone who enjoys life outside of their office"—that is, pretty much everyone. "When people have a three-day weekend to look forward to, there apparently is less of a demand to put in for sick leave," Huntsman said. "Our workforce overall is more efficient during those four days."

A restructured schedule might even cut down on some of the "waste, fraud and abuse" that politicians love to attack. When a bill for a four-day workweek was floated in New York last year, some argued that, while essential institutions like hospitals must stay open around the clock, the state's bureaucratic bowels could probably use some streamlining.

But a non-standard week only works when it jives with people's lives. Shifting to a four-day schedule could, for example, disrupt parents' child care arrangements. Last fall, Hawaii's government drew the ire of some parents when it shifted to a four-day school week, shuttering schools on seventeen Fridays to save on education spending. Many fear it will shortchange children's education.

Utah's government is still transitioning to its shortened workweek, and a follow-up report by NPR revealed some of the kinks. Disgruntled state employee Nicki Lockhart said the long workday felt "like an eternity" and left her completely drained by the time she got home. And for the state, energy savings have so far fallen short of initial projections.

So would a condensed week help liberate workers from the daily grind, or just drive more exhaustion? Either way, the emergence of the 4/10 week prompts us to rethink how much of our lives revolve around work. The private sector workforce today is increasingly mobile, which means workers will need flexibility—as well as revamped protections—to cope with the accompanying instability.

The idea of a shorter week, whether it stems from budget strains or grassroots pressure, reflects how the Information Age economy continues to redraw the line between work and life. As the workforce shifts toward knowledge industries and cubicles, maybe it's time to reschedule.

—Michelle Chen

BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

Who is the Real Terrorism Powder Puff?



NO SOONER COULD you say “oy, longer lines at airport security,” than the right-wing blare machine was accusing President Obama of being a “powder puff” and soft on terror.

Brian Kilmeade said on *Fox & Friends* that the administration “won’t even acknowledge that we’re in the war on terror or that a terror strike could occur.” Ac-

cording to Media Matters, which debunks these delusional vituperations, Rush Limbaugh’s substitute host, Mark Steyn, claimed, “Obama’s ‘Islamoo-schmoozing’ has had the effect of increasing terrorist attacks against the United States.” Dick Cheney charged that Obama was “pretending” there was no war against terrorism and was thus jeopardizing the safety of Americans. And, Michael Goodwin wrote in the *New York Post* that Obama “is a war president who defiantly shuns the mantle. So be it. The Oval Office and the choices are his. And so is the responsibility. If America gets hit again, it’s on him. All of it.” Goodwin then claimed that after 9/11 there were no more successful terrorist attacks on the United States. That is false.

Steyn also argued, “Obama’s priority when it comes to dealing with terrorists is to make sure they’re not in Guantánamo.” He then falsely claimed that “70 or so” released Guantánamo detainees “are suspected or known to have returned to terrorist activity since their release.” Newt Gingrich echoed this accusation on *The O’Reilly Factor*: “The Obama administration continues to release terrorists back into the world.” When Bill O’Reilly, of all people, has to correct such misinformation—“But Bush did that. Bush released those two guys. That was under the Bush administration”—you know you might have a real whopper circulating.

So here’s a quiz. (All information based on that bastion of the liberal media, *The Wall Street Journal*, citing a report from the Defense Department.) Who released, and when, the following former Guantanamo detainees?

Ibrahim Shair Sen, who was arrested in Van, Turkey, and indicted as a leader of al Qaeda cells in that country.

A) Obama, yesterday

B) Bush, 2003

Abdullah Saleh Ali al-Ajmi, who conducted suicide

bombing in Mosul, Iraq.

A) Obama, yesterday

B) Bush, 2005

Said Mohammed Alim Shah, who kidnapped two Chinese engineers, claimed responsibility for a bombing at an Islamabad hotel, directed a suicide attack in Pakistan, and blew himself up to avoid capture by Pakistani forces.

A) Obama, yesterday

B) Bush, 2004

(Saving the best for last) Mohammed Ateeq Owaid al Awfi al-Harbi and partner-in-crime Said Ali al-Shihri, now leaders of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which claimed responsibility for the failed bombing attempt over Detroit.

A) Obama, Christmas Eve

B) Bush, 2007

If you answered “B” to all of the above, you are correct. If you answered A, you are watching, like, way too much Fox news. (We now await Fox blaming Obama for bad

weather.) Imagine, just imagine, if the record above was actually held by Bill Clinton, let alone Obama.

Of course, the real problem that the Bush and Obama administrations have faced is the utter failure by intelligence agencies to connect the dots. As Thomas Kean, a co-chair of the 9/11 commission, and its senior counsel John Farmer noted in *The New York Times*, the 9/11 commission was stunned to learn that the FAA had no idea that the State Department maintained a terrorist watch list. The current “no fly” list consists of about 4,000 people. As we all know now, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was not on it, despite his own father’s efforts to warn CIA officials about his son’s increased radicalism (and to actually share his son’s rabid text messages with them).

Anyone who saw Obama’s stern and angry press conference denouncing “a systemic failure” and his demands for accountability can’t think he is any more of a “powder puff” than Bush was. Our under-achieving intelligence system, our still-inadequate airport security system, and how we as a country protect ourselves against this hydra-headed network that is al Qaeda are not partisan problems. Most people in the country gave Bush the benefit of the doubt after 9/11. It is a mark of how craven—and indeed, unpatriotic—the right wing is that they will not do the same for our current president. ■

TENDING 'THE GROW'

MARIJUANA AT A CROSSROADS

— BY MICHAEL POLSON —

IN THE WARM, LUMINESCENT GLOW OF THE DUST ENCRUSTED LIGHT FIXTURE, THE CARPETED AND DANK HALLWAY DISAPPEARS INTO UNVACUUMED RECESSES. DARREN GRABS AN UNOBTRUSIVE HANDLE ALONG THE WALL'S FLIMSY WOOD PANELING, PULLS, AND

a crack of light pierces the gloom. Pushing aside a black screen of Hefty bags intended to block light and trap heat, he reveals his miniature grow closet. A heavy, supple branch tumbles out. It brushes my hand, leaving a telltale streak of sticky, stinky moistness. The resin goes away with a bit of water. The smell stays.

A ventilator and wooden door couldn't dilute the pungent odor of the maturing female plants. When I point this out, Darren offers me only a mischievous smile. He's proud of this little closet-conversion. Six plants in all, two to a shelf, a 150-watt lamp substituting for sunlight in this hallway cupboard. "You can hide it no problem, but the smell is crazy. Next week my whole house is going to reek! Clipping and all that," he tells me. Ten days away from "pulling" the plants, Darren's "babies" are reaching their most odorous phase.

On this trip, Darren is very ill, a result of his 24-year battle with HIV and his many years as a homeless addict. But he meets with me anyway. He closes the cupboard and I follow the trailing ties of his plaid terrycloth bathrobe to his bedroom where he unceremoniously plops himself on

a frameless mattress.

Darren possesses a medical marijuana care receiver ID card, a designation established by California voters in the 1996 Proposition 215, the "Compassionate Use Act", and its updated correlative, Senate Bill 420. "I want to be able to grow enough. I want to be able to do that for my sick friends. I have an obligation," Darren explains, making sure I know his intentions for growing weed. A religious man and a veteran, Darren is not keen on being perceived as a criminal or a profiteer. His medical marijuana prescription had expired 9 months before, but he hadn't been able to afford its replacement, rendering illegal his plants, stash and herbal gifts to another HIV-positive friend who had just suffered an aneurysm.

Of course, even with a prescription, it is all technically illegal because he lives in HUD-supported (read: federally governed) housing. Despite Attorney General Eric Holder's October 19 memorandum backing away from prosecuting medical marijuana in states that have legalized it, drug possession on "federal property" remains a felony and a basis to render Darren homeless again, excluding him from state



and federal benefits for life.

"I have to sell my pain meds to get marijuana—my other medicine," he says. "I run short of pain meds every month. I freak out the last few days. Go buy from somebody else with the money I made from selling my meds before. Vicious circle."

It is vicious. Temper tantrums, green skin, hyperactivity or complete incapacitation. The pain meds allow him to get out of bed; the pot allows him to not vomit the meds and all his food. The monthly shuffle usually ends in fraught negotiations with friends for advances and loans, intensified by chronic and piercing pain.

The grow in his house allows him some room to maneuver. Noe, his cousin, set it up in return for a couch and sheets after she fled a dicey situation in Flint, Mich. "Do you know anybody that does identity changes?" he asks, suggesting Noe was actively melting, like so many before, into the haven of California's marijuana hills. Her experience growing hydroponic indoor pot for years in Flint, in factories long since abandoned, would come in handy. Changing the subject, he wrestles his

dog into his lap, hugging and petting him with a heavy but careful hand.

Nursing a pipe and becoming more glassy-eyed by the moment, Darren compares Flint, which he describes as a "war zone" of burnt-out houses, to this town in Northern California's mythical "Emerald Triangle" of marijuana production. "Here I leave my car unlocked, my house unlocked. Noe goes from that to here!" He sighs, then tells me about "here": the robberies he experienced living under a bridge, his homeless nephew, a meth-addicted friend, his constant worry. "It's present, always. You'd think after two years I'd be pretty secure here." But safety is not security. From mining to timber, housing to budget cuts, one economic hemorrhage after another has made insecurity and poverty a seeping reality.

As Darren and I move to the living room, he hands me a Pepsi and pops fish sticks in the oven. The room is populated by lingering Christmas tinsel, a lone swivel chair, a rug musty with spilled drinks and dog hair, and large windows shedding sun on a dusty television. Darren lights up, and a cloud billows from his mouth. "I don't know how I do it,

but I manage every day. The point is to move to the next day and get through this one. If I keep doing that, life is good. For all that, I'm blessed." As he speaks, the last of the smoke exits his lungs and the haze in the room dissipates in the thin northern California sun.

Sniffing out the industry

Smell is elusive. It lingers, its creeping whiff suggests matter not seen, even as its pervasiveness indicts everyone in its bloom. To law enforcement, smell is often the most telling indicator of the presence of weed, but to most residents here in the "Emerald Triangle," the drifting smell of marijuana is as remarkable as winter's rain or summer's tourist traffic. As I dine with one marijuana "clipper," the waitress walks over with her pad, double takes, and says a bit too loudly, "I could get high just standing here and sniffing." Outside the local honky-tonk, at bus stops, at the town square, in the cars of growers, at the front door of houses tucked into the shadowy recesses of the redwood gloom, the smell of this estimated \$36 billion national industry—by some estimates the largest cash crop in Ameri-

PHOTO: JOSHUA SMITH

ca—permeates the area.

Stay in any town in Northern California long enough and the industry's trail isn't hard to catch. Social networks of production and distribution fill in the gaps left by a failed formal economy. Darren's cousin Noe, plugging into a Great Lakes export and distribution circuit, gathered multiple investors comprised of unemployed friends, contract workers, and welfare recipients to set up her own indoor grow. Banking on NorCal's valued *terroir*, California product is prized: One study puts California fourth in pot exports, far

there is a housing shortage as an estimated 1,000 of 7,500 homes are re-purposed for growing, causing a stink among community activists. In the rainy season, when San Francisco's northbound wine and luxury tourists slow to a trickle, the cash economy steams ahead. It's easy to get stuck in line at Home Depot, Wal-Mart and local hardware stores in the area, as people lay out stacks of \$100 bills for dehumidifiers and mosquito and gnat killers. This is a cash economy and, fortunately for growers, "money has no smell," as anthropologist Paul Stoller has noted.

rors a spike in plant seizures: since 2007, California has seized more plants than in the previous 24 years combined. While misdemeanor arrests, which comprise the majority of cases, are increasing, felony arrests for sales or cultivation surged 19 percent to the highest absolute level seen since 1990, according to California's Criminal Justice Statistic Center. These rising amounts of arrests for production and distribution suggest something more than a consumption-based crackdown. They reveal the tumult and contradictions of an entire economy in transition.

Holder's memo means little without uniform legalization, says one medical grower. 'It just depends, like most things, on who you know: the cushion, the protection you have locally. Otherwise, you're on your own.'

behind Hawaii and close to the East Coast supply states of Tennessee and Kentucky. Californians export about 3 pounds for every pound they smoke. While major trafficking occurs, significant portions are distributed via migrant "trimming" workers—runaways, day laborers, jobless felons, college students—paid in bud.

In all, there are an estimated 1 to 3 million growers in the United States, with 100,000 to 200,000 commercial growers, according to Eric Schlosser, author of *Reefer Madness*. These figures don't include those involved in clipping, dealing, tending and guarding, nor the scores of real-estate agents, carpenters, diggers, electricians and investors. These networks overlay each other, providing an alternate safety net in a state that has been in an almost continual budget-cutting crisis since the dot-com and technology bust in 2001.

With this dynamic throughout Northern California, marijuana has produced a counter-cyclical economy that thrives upon personal connections, social networks and cash embraces. One young couple I met provides rides in their van, a couch to crash on, and communal meals in return for "gifted" pot. Selling the drug pays their rent, food, and costs for their newborn. In the town of Arcata in Humboldt County, despite the foreclosure crisis,

Sociologists Katherine Beckett and Bruce Western argue that poor populations, thrust out of the formal economy and into illegal markets, are now "managed" not by welfare but by prisons and police. Media stories reducing marijuana to a wink-wink, nudge-nudge joke about silly stoners and latter-day hippies miss the realities of criminalization and incarceration. Nationwide, in 2008, 847,863 people were arrested for marijuana-related charges; 55 percent of federal prisoners are nonviolent drug offenders; and 1 in 45 Americans are parolees and subject to heightened searches, seizures and re-arrests. Since 1991, marijuana arrests have increased 150 percent, with males aged 15 to 19 bearing rates eight times above average and African Americans experiencing 300 percent higher arrests than whites, despite having only 25 percent higher reported rates of use. Because of intensive policing in poor communities of color, weed is sold in smaller amounts, thus jacking up unit prices and pumping more money into the illicit economy at the expense of already-impoverished communities.

While California marijuana arrests decreased after Prop 215, in 2005 arrests rose again, resulting in the largest increase since decriminalization in 1976. This mir-

The growers

Patrick moves a ledger and a hands-free set—his mobile office—off the passenger seat and motions for me to hop in. A scentless duffel bag full of vacuum-sealed cannabis sits in the back—the next delivery to a San Francisco hospice. We drive to a state park in Lake County, reach a hilltop, leave the "office" and settle on a picnic table, surveying a 270-degree view of the coastal forest below. A prominent grower, Patrick's star is rising in the medical marijuana world. His "purple," a strain of sativa marijuana named for its purple hue, is popular not only for its strength but for its easy brand recognition.

With three indoor grows and a dispensary on the way, Patrick makes good money. Since the inauguration of Reagan's Just Say No campaign, during which federal anti-narcotic spending rose 1,300 percent, growers in California have been taking their operations indoors to avoid detection. Patrick has benefited from learning hydroponic growing techniques from friends in his Midwest hometown. The result? Higher potency, increased cycles per year, more yield per plant, and more profit.

Under Prop 15's ambiguous legal wording, he gets a "reasonable rate of remuneration." "It's a black market and we take

a lot more risks than anyone else,” Patrick says. “It’s fair that we get paid for that risk.” It’s this risk, even for “legal” growers, that makes pot profitable. Labor and materials are relatively incidental costs, but insurance and transporting the product to market cost much more. State raids and vigilante violence effectively serve as negative subsidies to the industry.

Patrick is a “caregiver,” certified to grow for a care receiver (like Darren), who authorizes him as supplier. Every week he gives a free half-ounce to nearly a dozen patients, the majority of whom are low-income African Americans and Latinos in a San Francisco hospice. And, going a step beyond his legal responsibility, he pays for all of his patients’ care-receiver ID cards and updated prescriptions.

Following uneven regulations is a challenge. Patrick is legal when he gives pot to care receivers, but illegal when he sells to medical dispensaries. Dispensaries are legal according to local and state officials, but not to San Francisco’s U.S. Attorney, who argues that they are “commercial enterprises,” under language in Holder’s memorandum. Patrick’s care receivers are legal when their prescriptions are updated but not if they live in subsidized housing. When Patrick’s workers transport two pounds of pot to San Francisco, they become legal and illegal several times as they cross county lines. Who’s “legal” depends upon who stands in what relationship to which law in what place.

As the state slouches toward uniform and clear laws, those in the medical marijuana industry remain subject to the whims of individual judges, prosecutors, politicians, and law enforcement officials. One medical grower, who has watched numerous medical marijuana acquaintances get busted, argues that Holder’s memo means little without uniform legalization. “It just depends,” he says, “like most things, on who you know: the cushion, the protection you have locally. Otherwise, you’re on your own.”

Patrick is a man with a hearty handshake and direct eye-contact that could seal any deal. As a figure in a pioneering industry, he fits into a long line of local business people who represent a moral, paternal capitalism set against the ravages of “big



capital.” Expecting to get a stock answer, I inquire about legalization. He smiles wryly, and says, “Most of us aren’t farmers. 99.9 percent of us would be put out of business. This is a cottage industry. Money is more spread out now than it would be otherwise. How many tobacco growers or oil companies are there these days? A couple major ones and that’s it.” He tells me that in the end, much of the industry is run by “the same people that run most businesses in the U.S.: old white guys.”

Tending the garden

It’s not, however, old white guys that work the farms. For Ricardo, a day laborer periodically hired from the local Latino labor pool by one grower to do work on a farm, \$20 an hour is a solid wage. While he has never tended marijuana, he has done landscaping and set-up. Based on the backwoods locations, funny smells emanating from barns and elevated hourly earnings, his employer’s profession is no mystery.

An undocumented immigrant from Guatemala, he works most of the year between odd day-labor jobs, and lives in a house with eight other undocumented workers. He sends most of his wages home to Guatemala, a country where remittances total more than exports and tourism combined. While he used to return home in the winter when work was slow, tightening borders and increased protection costs have made it impractical and dangerous.

Instead, he often finds himself working for growers.

Recent reports suggest that it is men like Ricardo who are picked up by absentee growers and dropped off in state-owned land with supplies and a gun to “tend” garden with promise of payment at season’s end. Each grower will likely establish multiple grows, numbering in the tens of thousands of plants, banking that at least a few gardens will remain undiscovered. Meanwhile, it is undocumented immigrants like Ricardo who are caught in the crosshairs of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and Immigration and Customs Enforcement; the growers go untouched. As journalist David Samuels indicates, to the extent that raids on “immigrant” outdoor grows occur, these seizures actually subsidize the “white,” indoor grows by decreasing competition and risk as law enforcement is diverted.

Media reports and law enforcement agencies contend this is the work of “cartels,” often despite any proof or convictions. The association of Mexicans and marijuana goes back to the original “reefer madness” of the 1930s, but today finds its California expression in a new mantra: undocumented immigrants and marijuana lead to violence and guns, pollution to California’s state forests (where many of the more sensational raids on “cartels” occur) and methamphetamine trafficking.

This perceived trifecta of pollution-



Trimming through the night.

JOSHUA SMITH

meth-guns is effective in mobilizing liberal, middle-class angst against marijuana. Recent coverage contrasts this looming “danger” against an image of organic, indoor medical growers (“white boy grows,” or “mom and pop” operations), who are the heart-and-soul of marijuana—and endangered. Even some pot advocates rail against “criminal activity” and “sleazy grow houses,” exemplified by a nativist “Always Buy Colorado” campaign to encourage homegrown—not Mexican—marijuana. As decriminalization and legalization advance, it seems the categories of “good” and “bad,” legal and illegal, medical and criminal may shift in important ways, while reproducing old patterns.

Reaching the crossroads

“The first thing is to get marijuana decriminalized, get people out of jail and stop arrests” says Joey Ereneta of Oaksterdam University, a training institute for those in the medical marijuana industry. With at least five state-level legalization and taxation measures and several more medical marijuana bills on the 2010 docket, the stage is set. Holder’s memo has pushed advocates into high gear while this period of reprieve from federal prosecution exists. “With more legalization and safer access,” he explains, “you’re going to see that consumers and patients will be the winners. The people in the industry will have to work harder

to maintain themselves. The trade-off is worth it, even for growers, when you factor in your stress level from operating illegally, and the continual risk of losing your livelihood and basic freedoms.”

While Patrick agrees, he also notes that it will mean lost jobs and industrial consolidation, which is why he has established a base of three high-quality grows and is seeking municipal certification for his San Francisco distribution center. But for people without capital to invest in scaled production sites, and for workers without access to basic citizenship and labor rights, the situation requires more consideration.

Multiple legislative solutions are possible: inclusion of care receivers in government healthcare programs; inclusion of marijuana farmworkers in labor, wage, and workplace regulations; requirements for living wages and benefits, particularly as the high price of marijuana declines toward its production costs; caps on the size of marijuana production sites and horizontal integration to ensure limits to consolidation; and channeling new government revenue sources into education, healthcare and entitlements to benefit those displaced from the industry, from South Central LA to Humboldt County.

The stakes are high. A 2006 report by marijuana policy researcher Jon Gettman found that, using conservative pricing estimates, California’s marijuana economy is the largest cash crop in the

state—more than grapes, vegetables and hay combined. Put another way, the largest cash crop in the world’s eighth largest economy in the world is poised to enter into legal circulation.

Many are taking note. The Open Society Institute (OSI) of George Soros, the billionaire famous for building a fortune through Eastern European “emerging markets,” has funded legalization efforts in the United States for quite some time. The libertarian Cato Institute, dedicated to free markets and minimal government, has its own favored legalization and medical marijuana organizations. And George Schulz, who has deep ties with Bechtel Corporation, known for its involvement in Bolivian water privatization and Iraq “reconstruction” contracts, Glenn Beck, avid opponent of government healthcare and immigration reform, and the late Milton Friedman, whose economic “shock” doctrine has served as the template for neoliberal reforms worldwide, have all enthusiastically endorsed marijuana legalization.

While the U.S. government still retains the cannabis patent, effectively barring commercial development, one corporation is preparing patents for THC-harvesting technology, likening it to the cotton gin. Since the AMA’s November call for a review of cannabis’ federal prohibited status and the opening of clinical research, two medical marijuana corporations have gone public.

Marijuana is already big business—fueling micro-economies stretching from Detroit to California to Guatemala and macro-economies covering military technology, border patrols and law enforcement at all levels. Legalization would necessarily shift all this. Free-market libertarians and social justice progressives have made common cause on decriminalization, but what happens after that is an open question.

Crassly put: Who gets what cut and under what circumstances? Is it a new green economy? The next conquest of Big Pharma or agribusiness? An emerging state-regulated-and-taxed wine industry? As the marijuana garden grows, its scent blossoms, and cross-pollinating swarms gather, the harvest in California and across the country promises to be a telling time. ■

Legislated to Death

A gay Ugandan blogger tells his story to the world

BY JOHN IRELAND



AS THE EARLY MORNING sun rose over Kampala on Oct. 14, 2009, Gug lay in bed and contemplated his life. ("Gug" is a pseudonym he uses on his blog, GayUganda.blogspot.com, which provides a rare view into the LGBT experience in his country.) Regular power outages yield dead laptop batteries. They also assure intimate candlelight dinners...and sex. For this workaday poet in his mid-30s, it was time to wake up and face the harsh realities and intoxicating beauty of his country, a juxtaposition he knows all too well. By lunchtime, his life as a gay Ugandan would become riskier than he could imagine. (See page 18 for an interview with Gug.)

That day, "The Anti-Homosexuality Bill" was introduced by Ugandan Member of Parliament David Bahati. Gays have faced legal persecution in Uganda for decades, a vestige of British anti-sodomy laws that predate the country's independence. Homosexual sex currently carries a 14-year maximum sentence in the country, but the new bill adds the definition of "aggravated homosexuality," which would carry the

death penalty. This would apply to "serial offenders," those "living with HIV," anyone who uses drugs or alcohol in the commission of the crime, and anyone who has sex with someone who is disabled or under 18 years of age. The bill also adds prison sentences for anyone who "promotes homosexuality" or knows of it and fails to "disclose the offence," including parents that fail to inform on their children. Uganda's parliament may take up the bill soon after reconvening on February 15.

Vocal condemnations of the bill have been issued from across the world. These include repudiations from a handful of American congressmen and Christian leaders, who—as it turns out—have traveled frequently over the past decade to Uganda, laying the groundwork for a revived anti-homosexuality campaign.

Perhaps the most influential international voice on the issue is the high-profile evangelical pastor Rick Warren, founder of the California-based Saddleback megachurch. In 2005, he welcomed Martin Ssempe to his congregation to present on HIV/AIDS prevention in Africa. Ssempe, a prominent backer of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, is a charismatic

pastor from Kampala and a longtime antigay activist in Uganda. For many years, he has waged a campaign to publish the names of suspected gays, causing them to go into hiding.

In March 2008, Warren traveled to Uganda to show his support of the country's Anglican bishops who were protesting the Church of England's tolerance of homosexuality. Criminalization of homosexuality in Uganda is often justified by Warren's widely circulated edict: "Homosexuality is not a natural way of life and thus not a human right." In addition, anticolonial sentiment has long fueled the ignorant belief that homosexuality is a Western import. Bahati alleges that foreign and non-governmental organizations, including UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund), actively promote homosexuality.

Tweeting from the closet

The actions of these politicians and religious leaders have dramatically changed the lives of gay and lesbian Ugandans. On

Photos at top from left: Gug on the move in Kampala, and protecting his anonymity at home.

Dec. 30, 2009, Gug was outed in an article in *The Red Pepper*, a newspaper published in Kampala.

Well aware that state-run media are off-limits, Gug has made rich use of less easily regulated outlets. His blog posts are often delayed due to regular power outages and slow server response times, so many of his most poignant observations are delivered via mobile phone, as he sits in the lush darkness of a central African downpour.

Gug's Twitter feed describes the increased pressure he feels to go deeper into the closet:

"my friends by law should report me. within 24hrs of knowing i had sex"

"life can be tough. but well, we continue living it. if i tweet every time after sex i will keep a record."

"a record of the number of lifetimes i should spend in prison. just for making love."

"seated in the middle of kampala with my partner of years shoulder to shoulder. yeah. homophobic uganda"

Gug also provides a deeper assessment of the reality of his homeland, again on Twitter: "living in uganda, its tough to reconcile the ugly, and the beauty of life. they present side by side."

According to American journalist Jeff Sharlet, author of the 2008 book *The Family* that exposed the U.S. congressional ties of a secretive group of Christian power brokers of the same name, Bahati is a "core member" of the group. According to Sharlet, The Family preaches a gospel of "biblical capitalism," which blends evangelical Christianity, right-wing politics and free marketism into a worldview that celebrates power as a reflection of God's grace.

Bahati has organized the Ugandan National Prayer Breakfast along with James Nsaba Buturo, the country's Min-

Gug speaks out: 'It's a risk I have to carry.'

On January 4, Gug (a pseudonym), who blogs on Gay Uganda, talked to *In These Times* about his hopes and fears. He spoke about how Americans can help ensure that he and his fellow gay Ugandans are not executed by their government for committing "aggravated homosexuality." Because his mobile phone and landline are controlled by the Ugandan government, Gug used the Internet telephone service Skype for this interview.

You are a thorn in the side of the Ugandan government right now.

Yes, Gay Uganda is clearly promoting homosexuality and right now I'm challenging members of parliament and the government.

Are you concerned that they will identify you and that you may be arrested?

I'm very mindful. *The Red Pepper*, one of Uganda's papers, outed me. But it's a risk that I have to carry. At the moment it is the international exposure that is a kind of protection. Though, it is not very good protection, of course. [laughs]

How did you feel back in October, when the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was introduced?

At the beginning, it was like the bill was going to pass without discussion, without anybody saying, "Nay."

But the international condemnation, the international pressure, has forced a discussion, even within Uganda. People are comparing this to Nazi Germany.

I read that supporters of the bill are calling for a national march on January 19.

Pastor Martin Ssemu, the chief backer of the bill, is organizing churches' call for people to come from upcountry to Kampala and march on parliament. They want to make sure the bill passes with as little change as possible. We've heard reports that President Yoweri Museveni assured the U.S. State Department that the bill will not be passed. So, they want to make sure that that does not occur.

What can the average American do to support your cause?

Right now, Uganda is getting a lot of military aid from the United States because there is the war on terror, which is in Somalia. And because of this, that means that the Obama administration has a lot of clout with [Museveni]. I am very sure that pressure on my end is not going to do any trick. But I am also sure that if there is pressure on the government of Uganda from the United States, this bill will not become law.

Have you and your partner made any plans in the case that you need to leave Uganda?

Uganda is a very beautiful country. This is our home. My partner and I are united in that. So these guys want to come and kill us? No! This is our country. We do not want to go to Europe.

How has your activism affected relations with your family?

I don't discuss my sexuality much with



A view of Kampala

most of my family. I know my father is following this avidly. Well [laughs], the last few months, he asked me if I should not get out of the country, so I know he is worried. But I can't, of course, tell him that I am doing this sort of activism, which I think he suspects. Some [family members] I am not able to engage at all, the subject does not arise. It's that kind of thing. We just don't talk about it.

Through the Gay Uganda blog, you have played a significant role in getting this story out to the international community. Are you surprised at the following that you've developed?

When I first got copies of this bill, I was very unhappy and depressed, because I knew the bill was going to become law without my doing anything to stop it. Then, I realized, I can rely on the kindness of strangers. People outside Uganda are the ones who are helping us. I want to thank them. If it wasn't for the fact that they are putting so much pressure on their governments, my government wouldn't think twice about making this bill law. ■



On December 30, 2009, Gug was outed in this story in *The Red Pepper*, a Ugandan newspaper.

ister for Ethics and Integrity. Sharlet has recently detailed the deep connections between U.S. Sens. John Ensign (R-Nev.) and Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) and Uganda's leadership over the past decade, particularly as military and infrastructure aid has flowed to Uganda from the United States. This includes a \$15 million "abstinence only" anti-AIDS campaign, which is credited with halting the nation's once-robust condom distribution programs, and thus almost certainly fostering the spread of HIV.

Kuchu (queer)

Closeted life is similar the world over. Gug finds a comfort zone and a way to "pass" that has kept him safe so far. He can relax within a tight-knit group of other "kuchus" in bars, after the early evening crowd leaves. He tweets:

like a change of guard. football fans out. us partiers in. and the night is young... its pleasant to be in a place of safety. where i and other kuchus can interact in relative safety. a heavy cloak lifts.

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill is transforming his circle of friends, forcing them to make difficult choices. He describes how he and his partner are drawn into the battle, sometimes reluctantly:

"he is on the phone. counseling. someone being blackmailed. yeah, a kuchu. life, as normal"

"some weighty decisions on my mind. personal. I tend to mull them over.. and i have"

"would i ever leave kampala??? or uganda? not by choice. this is home"

Gug is politically active in the Kampala LGBT community, but has chosen thus far to lead from the shadows. Until he was outed in the press last month, he was facing a deep personal crisis of how best to stand

up to the oppression, while eluding those who could do him harm. He tweets:

"i have a horror of being outed. true. but my camouflage has worn thin over the years. too many know who i am"

"back to thought. the battle is a desperate one. so, our weapons have to be horned. a brain that is versatile and quick."

On December 10, in a seeming about-face, Warren recorded a video "encyclical," in which he explains to Ugandan pastors that he opposes the bill. Gug and other Ugandan LGBT activists suspect it was largely an effort to mollify Western media and rights watchdog groups.

Gug writes on his blog:

"We are poor. Only 4% of the country has internet connection, so very few will hear about the fact that he has done what he did. Of course, the Christian stations are very many. So, he can use his clout to air it? Please?...!"

Warren's office did not return phone calls requesting information on how the video will be distributed.

If the bill passes, Uganda stands to lose

a great deal of international credibility, as well as funding. Sweden, which gives \$50 million in aid to Uganda each year, has indicated it will reassess its commitment. Catherine Hankins, the chief scientific adviser for UNAIDS, speaking of the African AIDS Vaccine Program, warned that, "If the bill passes, [we] would have to decide...whether this is an appropriate place [for the funding]." Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wisc.) recently warned, "[The bill's] passage would hurt the close working relationship between our two countries, especially in the fight against HIV/AIDS." The U.S. annual commitment is estimated to be approximately \$250 million.

Commenting on the pressure being exercised by the international community, Bahati is defiant: "We are not going to yield to any international pressure—we cannot allow people to play with the future of our children and put aid into the game. We are not in the trade of values. We need mutual respect."

For his part, Ssempe is preparing for battle. He responded to Warren's encyclical with a heated video of his own claiming that Ugandans are so angry ("sheer rage") with one-time ally Warren's message that they are planning to burn copies of his bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life* in the streets. He goes on to say that there will be nationwide demonstrations "opposing Barack Obama" saying that Ugandans "will not bend over for homosexuality."

Part of the need for the law, Ssempe explains, is that Africa has a big problem with "sorcerers" spreading the belief that people with HIV/AIDS can "get healed" if they "rape a virgin." He does not mention that current law already provides the death penalty for "aggravated defilement" (essentially statutory rape), with the same circumstances specified in the proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill.

"Our fathers have handed down a rich heritage...how can we turn around and betray 5,000 years worth of history?" Ssempe says. "Even when they threaten to cut off aid...if homosexuality is the price for receiving Malaria drugs and [antiretrovirals] to treat our people who have HIV/AIDS, then we would rather die." ■

The Strange Fruit of Desperation

How con men and paranoiacs learned to love the Hardin huskow

BY BEAU HODAI



Hardin, Mont., is home to this alleged "FEMA concentration camp."

BEAU HODAI

HARDIN: A SLEEPY TOWN set in the rolling plains of southeastern Montana, 50 miles east of Billings, 15 miles north of the site of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's slaughter at the battle of Little Bighorn. Population: about 3,500. Primary mode of economic production: agriculture. The City of Hardin website explains the town was dubbed the "City of Reason" in the early 20th century, due to its "potential for economic growth"—a prophetically ironic designation given recent events.

Not much happens in Hardin. The streets, set in a grid around simple ranch-style homes, run quiet and slow. At the heart of the city sits a large rectangular park—a few blocks away from the Broadway Flying J truck stop casino and bar, home to I-90 long-haulers playing electronic keno and poker. The occasional crew of wrinkled Greyhound patrons file in looking to buy withered hot dogs and cigarettes.

Across the Flying J parking lot sits a Pizza Hut. A few miles east, a short trip over a few frozen fields, lies the Two Rivers Detention Facility, which has been vacant since its completion in 2007. The jail was built to provide sorely needed jobs for Hardin and the neighboring Crow Reservation. When the idea to build this huskow was pitched, Hardin had the highest unemployment rate in Montana. The reservation, with its corrugated tin shacks and tourist "trading post" emporiums filled with "genuine" Chinese moccasins and beads, is one of the most impoverished places in the nation.

Despite the area's need for employment, local officials have been unable to find inmates to fill their jail, and so the 464-room dormitory-style structure with its 20-foot fences and rolls of razor wire, leads a lonely existence at the city limits. The town's insurance policy on the jail, which expired Nov. 1, 2009, was not renewed for lack of funds. All utilities to the facility have been disconnected. And so it sits, a \$27 million

folly, an asset being eroded by a cold wind blowing sheets of snow through the recreation yard where once, one of the jail's sole occupants, a goat, used to graze during the brief period when the town's animal control office was housed there.

Mystery man from Montenegro

On the morning of Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2009, something out of the ordinary occurred to disrupt the general atmosphere of atrophy in town, and which would set Hardin as the backdrop for much national and international speculation.

Three Mercedes SUVs, sans license plates and bearing detachable magnetic decals reading "City of Hardin Police Department," rolled into town. From the center of the decals, the double-headed eagle crest of Montenegro glared out onto the dusty sidewalks and denizens of Hardin.

Piloting the miniature caravan was Michael Hilton, aka Miodrag Dokovich, aka "Captain Michael," the Montenegro-born owner of American Private Police Force

(APPF), a Santa Ana, Calif.-based company that boasted paramilitary operations across the globe; a subsidiary of a powerful, though unnamed, private security/armed forces corporation.

One problem with the sudden presence of these sleek law enforcement vehicles in Hardin was the fact that Hardin, seat of Big Horn County, has been without a police force since the 1970s.

Another issue, which brought no small amount of uneasiness, was the fact that Hilton and APPF had just signed a ten-year contract with Two Rivers Port Authority (TRA), Hardin's economic development arm, to lease the town's empty jail. Hilton had expressed ambitious goals for the facility, including the leasing of 5,000 acres adjacent to the jail as a training ground for his mercenary forces.

Enter the internet yahoos.

Rumors began to metastasize on the Web that evil was afoot in Hardin. One theory had it that Hilton's private army had taken over the jail as part of a New World Order plan to round up and detain Americans in strategically placed Federal Emergency Management Agency concentration camps.

Another theory posited that APPF's presence in Hardin was part of President Obama's plan to replace local police forces with armed mercenaries intent on forcibly administering the H1N1 flu vaccine—possibly a plot to kill off right-wing rural populations hip to the fact that Obama is a communist stoolie of the Illuminati, Shriners and the “international banker cartel.”

This story was boosted by an anonymous e-mail publicized by internet/radio celebrity Alex Jones, of infowars.com. The email, a cry for help supposedly penned by a Hardin resident, laid out the “dire” conditions in the town.

The message claimed that APPF forces had blockaded all exits and entrances to the town, and were stopping and detaining motorists. Hilton was said to have informed the city council that the swine flu vaccination would be administered to all Hardin residents. Those who refused would be jailed.

In closing, the unknown author wrote: “Things have changed so quickly in the

last 24 hours! Things are not and will never be the same. We are indeed going into the prophesied ‘four years of captivity for America.’ I believe we are about to enter into a time of persecution that the Church in America has never known! We must prepare!”

While the faithful awaited the final battle between Jesus and Satan, local

The APPF circus then dissipated as quickly as it had appeared.

It turned out Hilton was nothing more than a con man, a convicted felon who had spent 14 months in prison for theft and who had a civil judgment of more than \$1 million outstanding against him for swindling investors in a California development deal involving an assisted-

Was APPF's presence in Hardin, Mont., part of President Obama's secret plan to replace local police forces with armed mercenaries and forcibly administer the H1N1 flu vaccine to rural America?

businesses were inundated with phone calls from concerned individuals, former residents and media of all stripes.

Billings Gazette reporter Ed Kemmick related the level of paranoia to his readers: “Carrie McLeary, who lives outside Hardin but works in town as a store clerk, said she drove over to Forsyth to have a hog butchered Tuesday and found out later that her mother, in Spokane, had been trying to reach her all day. She said her mother and her friends ‘wanted to know how many casualties there were.’”

Hoping to quell the rumors, TRA posted a statement on its website: “We welcome anyone to visit our town! There are no commandos in the streets. There is no fence or gate being built around Hardin. People are free to come and go as they please. APPF [sic] is not running our town or our police force.”

Girl Scout spies

On Oct. 1, 2009, Jones flew into Montana from his infowars.com base in Austin, Texas, to broadcast live from the site of the Two Rivers Detention Facility. He described in vivid detail how he had been tailed through Billings Logan International Airport by a mob of Girl Scouts acting as spies for the Department of Homeland Security, and barked accusations at Becky Shay, *Billings Gazette* reporter-turned-APPF spokeswoman, that the group was nothing but a front for Xe Services, formerly Blackwater.

The next day Shay held a tearful press conference in which she said she feared for her safety.

living residence. This news prompted Montana Attorney General Steve Bullock to demand APPF produce documentation to back its grandiose claims. At a court appearance in California in late October stemming from the fraud civil suit, Hilton revealed that he was in fact destitute, living in a small basement apartment—and that APPF was essentially a corporation in name only; he had conned a few individuals into putting up the money for the website and storefront office space in a Santa Ana strip mall.

In a sad testament to either the trusting nature or the desperation of the town government, it was Hilton who pulled out of the deal and returned to California. There was no ride out on a rail, no tar-and-feathering—just a lot of sad people sitting on an empty jail, scratching their heads.

It remains business as usual for Hardin officials trying to save their town. They had considered converting the empty jail into some sort of low-income housing project, an indoor paintball park, or possibly a greenhouse for medical marijuana. None of the ideas stuck.

Instead, as the jail weathers the elements, local imaginations have turned to the idea of a “knacker” plant to provide the expanding East Asian market with horse meat. ■

Why did the people of Hardin build this unsuccessful, possibly cursed, prison? Three years earlier, another con man had taken these naifs for a ride. Beau Hodai's story continues in the March In These Times.

Gross Inaccuracies

The debate over why the GDP is flawed is about more than numbers

BY DAVID MOBERG

THERE'S A USEFUL OLD carpenter's adage—measure twice, cut once—that's also pretty good advice for other projects, like crafting public policy. Knowing as precisely as possible how a society is ticking helps both to better understand problems and formulate solutions.

Compared to woodworking, it's harder to measure what is going on in a society—or even to know what to measure. And relying on the wrong measurements can mess up public policy, tilting decisions politically and ignoring a society's shortcomings.

The big emerging debate focuses on the single most influential economic statistic—the gross domestic product, or GDP, which is the market value of all the goods and services produced in a country over a year, including private household consumption, investment, government spending and exports (minus imports).

The rise and fall of a nation's GDP is often taken as a measure of national well-being, even though it was not designed for that purpose by economist Simon Kuznets; he developed it during the 1930s Depression as a way of charting overall economic activity. It was a great breakthrough for economic planners and rapidly became the premier marker of how a country's economy was faring.

Lies, damned lies, and statistics

Almost from the beginning, many economists, including Kuznets, noted weaknesses in using the GDP to indicate the nation's well-being. But the current economic crisis has given new urgency to a wide range of criticisms raised in recent years.

As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Secretary-General Angel Gurría told a world forum on statistics in late October:



The rising GDP did not help Harvey Lesser. On December 11, in Boulder, Colo., sheriff's deputies evicted Lesser, 58, from his apartment for nonpayment of rent. Lesser, who says he suffers from high blood pressure, diabetes and chronic back problems, was laid off by IBM, where he once worked as a software developer.

A major challenge we experience today is the gap between what official statistics say about economic performance, and people's perception of their own living conditions... GDP was growing [before the crisis] but most people did not necessarily feel better-off. Now, the problem is even more critical.

Last fall, for example, pundits happily declared the recession was over when the Commerce Department reported that the GDP grew during the third quarter of 2009 at a 3.5 percent annual rate (it later revised the number down to 2.2 percent). At the same time, unemployment was climbing to more than 10 percent, and consumer confidence was slipping.

Before the crash, GDP reports were just as out of sync with people's experiences. GDP rose throughout the Bush era, but people were largely unhappy with

the economy. Most people's real incomes weren't growing, just those of the rich. It became clear that much of the GDP boom was an illusion. It was composed of a bubble of housing assets and funny-money financial derivatives. And since current growth is creating a climate crisis, it is also environmentally unsustainable.

One of the key problems with GDP as a measure of national welfare is that it treats "bad goods (and services)" the same as "good goods." If it costs \$100 million to clean up a toxic waste dump but only \$1 million to avoid it, the clean-up directly contributes 100 times as much to the GDP as the prevention, making the country "wealthier."

In other words, waste and inefficiency can make GDP bigger but leave people

worse off. For example, healthcare expenditures rose rapidly in recent years, but overall care and health outcomes did not keep pace. A single-payer system could have provided better health at lower cost, but the GDP would have been smaller in the short term.

Also, the GDP does not distinguish between the long-term significance of different types of economic activity. (That fact didn't bother Michael J. Boskin, chairman of President George H. W. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers, who said that "it doesn't make any difference whether a country makes potato chips or computer chips.") Likewise, the GDP does not recognize the loss of value when a dead-end job replaces one with more meaning. And it does not distinguish between egalitarian societies and those, like the United States, where the rich have recently captured most of the GDP growth.

Such critiques have spurred a search for a single number that can compete with the GDP as an indicator of how a society is doing, like the United Nation's Human Development Index (which incorporates life expectancy and education with economic output) or Bhutan's Buddhist-utilitarian Gross National Happiness index. Ecological economists Herman Daly and John Cobb developed an Index of Sustainable Welfare, which expanded the GDP to include indicators such as income distribution, natural resource depletion, environmental damage and the values of leisure. Their index showed that "sustainable welfare" tracked the GDP fairly closely in the United States until the late 1960s, then was flat or declined through the late 1980s, even as GDP grew.

Charting an alternative

The groundswell of criticism is now yielding some high-level results. Soon the OECD—the group of rich countries—will introduce a series of new measurements aimed at going beyond GDP. In October, a commission appointed by French president Nicholas Sarkozy and co-chaired by Nobel prize-winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen issued a report on "the measurement of economic performance and social progress."

Stiglitz and Sen find that the GDP fails

to provide a good guide to a nation's well-being on several counts, and they propose that countries rely on a group of indicators, not just a newly revised GDP.

First, they fault GDP calculations on technical grounds. For example, government activity now makes up roughly 40 to 50 percent of most rich nations' economies, but the current accounting of GDP does not accurately reflect governments' role.s

More significantly, Stiglitz and Sen argue that a real measure of national well-being requires assessment of the quality of life, the degree to which individuals have opportunities to develop their own talents, and the environmental sustainability of the system—all of which are ignored by the GDP and may or may not increase as it grows.

As a first step toward reform, Stiglitz and Sen propose focusing more on inequalities of income, consumption and savings of individual households. They also argue that it's important to count work done in households that isn't part of the market economy.

Equally important, a new index should measure how broadly human capabilities are developed, a standard that would certainly include not only education but also gender and ethnic discrimination. It's a critical measurement, Stiglitz and Sen say, since 80 percent of all wealth is in the form of "human capital."

Finally, policymakers need an index of sustainability. That would assess what stocks of natural resources are needed for a certain level of social well-being and whether current patterns of use will deplete needed supplies too quickly. Stiglitz and Sen want a separate indicator of pollution rather than include pollution costs with resource sustainability, as many "green GDP" measures do. They argue that such a mixed index is as useless as a car gauge combining measures of speed and fuel consumption on the same dial.

Building a better society

Whatever new alternative economists and policymakers settle on will be more nuanced than the GDP. Although defenders of the status quo will attack the assignment of values that are not strictly defined by the market, such as pollution costs,

subjective happiness or the value of equality, the intellectual and political tides are turning away from uncritical acceptance of markets.

Recent experience with financial markets and new research in behavioral and information economics—which show how real markets do not demonstrate the rationality or full information that theory assumes—reinforce the view that markets are seriously flawed, and government must intervene to compensate. That includes redefining key indicators, like the GDP.

Finding an alternative to the GDP won't change the world, but it would help to better frame debate about what a good society looks like, and the roles of government and markets. A more comprehensive measurement of the health and development of societies would support the broader movement to make public policy better serve humanity. ■

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India's Trail of Tears

To justify a land grab, Delhi has a new enemy—the Maoists

BY ARUNDHATI ROY



Mitu, a Dongria Kondh girl from Orissa, India.

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THE LOW, FLAT-TOPPED HILLS of south Orissa have been home to the Dongria Kondh long before there was a country called India or a state called Orissa. The hills watched over the Kondh. The Kondh watched over the hills and worshipped them as living deities. Now these hills have been sold for the valuable bauxite they contain. For the Kondh it's as though god had been sold. They ask how much god would go for if the god were Ram or Allah or Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the Kondh are supposed to be grateful that their Niyamgiri Hills, home to their Niyam Raja, God of Universal Law, have been sold to a company with a name like Vedanta (named for the branch of Hindu philosophy that teaches the Ultimate Nature of Knowledge). It's one of

the biggest mining corporations in the world and is owned by Anil Agarwal, the Indian billionaire who lives in London in a mansion that once belonged to the Shah of Iran. Vedanta is only one of the many multinational corporations closing in on Orissa.

If the flat-topped hills are destroyed, the forests that clothe them will be destroyed, too. So will the rivers and streams that flow out of them and irrigate the plains below. So will the Dongria Kondh. So will the hundreds of thousands of tribal people who live in the forested heart of India, and whose homeland is similarly under attack.

In India's smoky, crowded cities, some people say, "So what? Someone has to pay the price of progress." Some even say, "Let's face it, these are people whose

time has come. Look at any developed country—Europe, the United States, Australia—they all have a 'past.' Indeed they do. So why shouldn't 'we'?"

In keeping with this line of thought, on Dec. 3, 2009, the government launched Operation Green Hunt, a war purportedly against the Maoist rebels headquartered in the jungles of central India. The war is scheduled to last five years and deploy up to 70,000 police and paramilitary troops. Of course, the Maoists are by no means the only ones rebelling. There is a whole spectrum of struggles all over the country that people are engaged in—the landless, the Dalits, the homeless, workers, peasants, weavers. They're pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale corporate takeover of people's land and

resources. However, it is the Maoists that the government has singled out as being the biggest threat.

Two years ago, when things were nowhere near as bad as now, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the Maoists as the “single largest internal security threat” to the country. This will probably go down as the most popular and oft-repeated thing he ever said. For some reason, the comment he made at a January 2009 meeting of state chief ministers, when he described the Maoists as having only “modest capabilities,” doesn’t seem to have had the same raw appeal. He revealed his government’s real concern later that year in June, when he told parliament: “If left-wing extremism continues to flourish in parts which have natural resources of minerals, the climate for investment would certainly be affected.”

Maoist insurgents

Who are the Maoists? They are members of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist), also known as CPI (Maoist)—one of the several descendants of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which led the 1969 Naxalite uprising and was subsequently liquidated by the Indian government. The Maoists believe that the innate, structural inequality of Indian society can only be redressed by the violent overthrow of the Indian state. In its earlier avatars as the Maoist

Communist Centre (MCC) in Jharkhand and Bihar, and the People’s War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh, the Maoists had tremendous popular support. (When the ban on them was briefly lifted in 2004, 1.5 million people attended their rally in Warangal.)

Their intercession in Andhra Pradesh ended badly. They left a violent legacy that turned some of their staunchest supporters into harsh critics. After a paroxysm of killing and counter-killing by the Andhra Pradesh police as well as the Maoists, the PWG was decimated. Those who managed to survive fled the state of Andhra Pradesh to the neighboring state of Chhattisgarh, where, deep in the heart of the forest, they joined colleagues who had already been there for decades.

Not many outsiders have first-hand experience of the Maoist movement in the forest. A recent interview in *Open*, an Indian weekly magazine, with its top leader, Comrade Ganapathy (born Mupalla Laxman Rao), didn’t do much to change the minds of those who view the Maoists as a party with an unforgiving, totalitarian vision that countenances no dissent whatsoever. Comrade Ganapathy said nothing that would persuade people that, were the Maoists ever to come to power, they would be equipped to properly address the almost insane diversity of India’s caste-ridden society. His casual approval of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) of Sri Lanka was enough to send a shiver down even the most sympathetic of spines, not just because of the brutal ways in which the LTTE chose to wage its war, but also because of the cataclysmic tragedy that has befallen the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, who it claimed to represent, and for whose fate it surely must take some responsibility.

Right now in central India, the Maoists’ guerrilla army is made up almost entirely of desperately poor tribal people living in conditions of chronic hunger we only associate with sub-Saharan Africa. They are people who, even after 60 years of India’s so-called independence, have not had access to education, healthcare or legal redress. They are people who have been mercilessly exploited for decades, consistently cheated by small businessmen and moneylenders, the women raped as a matter of right by police and forest department personnel. Their journey back to a semblance of dignity is due in large part to the Maoist cadre who have lived and worked and fought by their side for decades.

In 2008, an expert group appointed by the Planning Commission submitted a report called “Development Challenges in Extremist-Affected Areas”. It said:

The Naxalite (Maoist) movement has to be recognized as a political movement with a strong base among the landless and poor peasantry and adivasis [India’s indigenous people]. Its emergence and growth need to be contextualized in the social conditions and experience of people who form a part of it. The huge gap between state policy and performance is a feature of these conditions. Though its professed long-term ideology is capturing state power by force, in its day-to-day manifestation, it is to be looked upon as basically a fight for social justice, equality, protection, security and local development

A very far cry from the country’s “single-largest internal security threat.”

The Planning Commission report went on to conclude, “[S]ince the goals of the movement are political, it has to be addressed politically. Negotiation is the only political instrument of such a response in a democracy.”

Nobody listened.

Warcraft à la Sri Lanka

In order to keep its better-off citizens



Many Dangria Kondh have blockaded roads to the proposed mine site, which would destroy their lives.



Niyamgiri mountain, the planned location for Vendanta's bauxite mine that will destroy the forests on which the Dongria Kondh depend.

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absolutely safe from these dangerous people, the government has declared war on them. A war which, it tells us, may take between three and five years to win. Odd, isn't it, that even after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the government was prepared to talk with Pakistan? But when it comes to waging war against the poor, it's playing hardball.

It's not enough that special police with totemic names like Greyhounds, Cobras and Scorpions are scouring the forests with a license to kill. It's not enough that the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the notorious Naga Battalion have already wreaked havoc and committed unconscionable atrocities in remote forest villages. It's not enough that the government supports and arms the Salwa Judum (Purification Hunt), a private vigilante "people's militia" that has killed and raped and burned its way through the forests of the Dantewada District, Chhattisgarh, leaving 300,000 people homeless or on the run. Now, as of Dec. 3, 2009, the government has commenced Operation Greenhunt.

Operation Greenhunt is deploying the Indo-Tibetan border police and tens of thousands of paramilitary troops. It will set up a brigade headquarters in the Bilaspur District (displacing nine villages) and an air base in the Rajnandgaon District (displacing seven). The helicopters

of the Indian air force have been given the right to fire in "self-defense"—a right the government denies its poorest citizens.

Fire at whom? How will the security forces be able to distinguish a Maoist from an ordinary person who is running terrified through the jungle? Will adivasis carrying the bows and arrows they have carried for centuries now count as Maoists too? Are non-combatant Maoist sympathizers valid targets? When I was in Dantewada, the superintendent of police showed me pictures of 19 "Maoists" that "his boys" had killed. I asked him how I was supposed to tell they were Maoists. He said, "See Ma'am, they have malaria medicines, Dettol bottles, all these things from outside."

What kind of war is Operation Green Hunt going to be? Will we ever know? Not much news comes out of the forests. Lalgarh in West Bengal has been cordoned off. Those who try to go in are being beaten and arrested. And called Maoists, of course.

In the space of a few hours on May 17, 2009, in Dantewada, 500 government security forces bulldozed out of existence the Vanvasi Chetana Ashram, a Gandhian ashram. It was the last neutral outpost before the war zone begins, a place where journalists, activists, researchers and fact-finding teams could stay while

they worked in the area.

Meanwhile, the Indian establishment has unleashed its most potent weapon. Almost overnight, our embedded media has substituted its steady supply of planted, unsubstantiated, hysterical stories about "Islamist terrorism" with planted, unsubstantiated, hysterical stories about "Red terrorism." In the midst of this racket, at ground zero, the cordon of silence is being inexorably tightened.

The "Sri Lanka solution" could very well be in the cards. It's not for nothing that the Indian government blocked a European move in the UN asking for an international probe into war crimes committed by the government of Sri Lanka in its recent offensive against the Tamil Tigers.

The first move in that direction is the concerted campaign that has been orchestrated to shoehorn the myriad forms of resistance taking place in this country into a simple George Bush binary: If you are not with us, you are with the Maoists. The deliberate exaggeration of the Maoist "threat" helps the state justify militarization. While all the oxygen is being used up by this new doppelganger of the "war on terror," the state will use the opportunity to mop up the hundreds of other resistance movements in the sweep of its military operation, calling them all Maoist sympathizers.

Once the war begins, like all wars, it will develop a momentum, a logic and an economics of its own. It will become a way of life, almost impossible to reverse. The police will be expected to behave like an army, a ruthless killing machine. The paramilitary will be expected to become like the police, a corrupt, bloated administrative force. We've seen it happen in the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Kashmir. The only difference in the "heartland" will be that it will become obvious very quickly to the security forces that they're only a little less wretched than the people they're fighting. In time, the divide between the people and the law enforcers will become porous. Guns and ammunition will be bought and sold. In fact, it's already happening. Whether it's the security forces or the Maoists or noncombatant civilians, the poorest people will die in this rich people's war.

Precious metal

So what kind of money are we talking about? In their soon-to-be-published book, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel*, Samarendra Das and Felix Padel write that the financial value of the bauxite deposits in the state of Orissa alone is \$2.27 trillion (more than twice India's GDP). That was at 2004 prices. Today, it would be about \$4 trillion.

Beyond Orissa, expand the \$4 trillion to include the value of the millions of tons of high-quality iron ore in the states of Chhattisgarh to the west and Jharkhand to the north, and the 28 other precious mineral resources, including uranium, limestone, dolomite, coal, tin, granite, marble, copper, diamond, gold, quartzite, corundum, beryl, alexandrite, silica, fluorite, and garnet. Add to that the power plants, the dams, the highways, the steel and cement factories, the aluminum smelters, and all the other infrastructure projects to estimate the scale of the operation and the desperation of the stakeholders. Often, if the mining company is a known and recognized one, the chances are that, even though the ore is still in the mountain, it will have already been traded on the futures market.

There are contracts on every mountain, river and forest glade. We're talking about social and environmental engineering on an unimaginable scale. And most of this is secret. It's not in the public domain. Our 24-hour news channels that are so busy hunting for macabre stories of Maoist violence—and making them up when they run out of the real thing—seem to have no interest at all in this side of the story. I wonder why?

Perhaps it's because the development lobby to which they are so much in thrall says the mining industry will ratchet up the rate of GDP growth dramatically and provide employment to the people it displaces. This does not take into account the catastrophic costs of environmental damage. But even on its own narrow terms, it is simply untrue. Most of the money goes into the bank accounts of the mining corporations. A very tiny percentage of the displaced people get jobs, and those who do, earn slave-wages to do humiliating, backbreaking work. By caving in to this

paroxysm of greed, we are bolstering other countries' economies with our ecology.

When the scale of money involved is what it is, the stakeholders are not always easy to identify. Between the CEOs in their private jets and the wretched tribal special police officers in the "people's" militias—who for a couple of thousand rupees a month fight their own people,

India, citing its violations of government guidelines and pointing out that the Norwegian Pension Fund had withdrawn its investment from the company alleging gross environmental damage and human rights violations committed by the company, Justice S.H. Kapadia suggested that Vedanta be substituted with Sterlite? He then blithely announced in an open court

There are contracts on every mountain, river and forest glade. We're talking about environmental engineering on an unimaginable scale. And most of this is secret. It's not in the public domain.

rape, kill and burn down whole villages in an effort to clear the ground for mining—there is an entire universe of primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders.

These people don't have to declare their interests, but they're allowed to use their positions and good offices to further them. How will we ever know which political party, which ministers, which MPs, which politicians, which judges, which NGOs, which expert consultants, which police officers, have a direct or indirect stake in the booty? How will we know which newspapers reporting the latest Maoist "atrocities," which TV channels "reporting directly from ground zero"—or, more accurately, making it a point not to report from ground zero, or even more accurately, lying blatantly from ground zero—are stakeholders?

Too many questions about conflicts of interest and cronyism remain unanswered. What are we to make of the fact that the Minister of Home Affairs P. Chidambaram, the chief of Operation Green Hunt, was a non-executive director of the mining company Vedanta—a position from which he resigned the day he became finance minister in 2004? What are we to make of the fact that, when he became finance minister, one of the first clearances he gave to allow foreign direct investment in India was to Twinstar Holdings, a Mauritius-based company, to buy shares in Sterlite, a part of the Vedanta group?

What are we to make of the fact that, when activists from Orissa filed a case against Vedanta in the Supreme Court of

that he, too, had shares in Sterlite. He gave forest clearance to Sterlite to go ahead with the mining, despite the fact that the supreme court's own expert committee had explicitly said that permission should be denied and that mining would ruin the forests, water sources, environment and the lives and livelihoods of the thousands of tribal people living there.

What are we to make of the fact that just around the time Prime Minister Singh began to call the Maoists the "single largest internal security threat" (a signal that the government was getting ready to go after them), the share prices of many of the mining companies in the region skyrocketed?

The mining companies desperately need this war. They will strike it rich, very rich, if the Indian government's counter-insurgency operations successfully evict the tribal people who have so far managed to resist the attempts to drive them from their ancestral lands.

But whether the coffers of the mining corporations will overflow, or whether Operation Green Hunt simply swells the ranks of the Maoists, remains to be seen. ■

This story was adapted from a longer article, "The Heart of India is Under Attack," first published by The Guardian of the U.K. To read the original, go to www.guardian.co.uk

The photographs are provided courtesy of Survival: The Movement for Tribal Peoples, www.survivalinternational.org.

BY ROBERT HIRSCHFIELD

Heresy of a 'Hebrew Palestinian'

Uri Davis is a “serial thorn in the side of the Israeli state,” according to British journalist Jonathan Cook. Justin White of the blog Taming Korach describes him as “Islam’s New Tool.” He has been called worse. Davis is an Israeli Jew (he prefers the descriptor ‘Hebrew Palestinian’) who

once headed the PLO London Bureau, and who currently holds a seat on the Fatah Revolutionary Council.

He was born in 1943 in Jerusalem. His mother was a Jew from Czechoslovakia, his father a Jew from the U.K. His father was a supporter of the Martin Buber group, Brit Shalom, which called for “absolute political equality” between Jews and Palestinians.

As an induction-age teenager, Davis was guilty of his first heresy: he refused military service on pacifist grounds. Never having been exposed to the stimulant of patriotism that is part of the Israeli soldier’s formation probably made it easier for him to embark in the mid-’80s on his definitive heresy, joining Fatah. (A third heresy occurred only recently. In 2008, in order to marry Palestinian Miyassar Abu Ali, he converted to Islam.)

A longtime academic, Davis was for many years a lecturer in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford in England, and is currently a professor of sociology at Al Quds University on the West Bank. His many books include *Israel: An Apartheid State* and *Towards A Socialist Republic of Palestine* (co-edited with Fouzi el-Asmar and Naim Khader).

In a statement of national self-definition, Davis declared, “I hold Israeli and British passports, but I consider myself Palestinian above all else.”

Your election, as an Israeli, to the

Revolutionary Council of Fatah last August, came as a surprise to many. What was your own reaction?

I was pleased because the election highlighted a historic but neglected streak within Fatah. My election to position number 31 in an election for 81 open seats [seats contested by more than 600 Fatah members] may signify a change in direction that has been neglected.

What is it exactly that has been neglected?

Thousands of international volunteers are aiding Fatah and the PLO. Renewing contacts with them, recognizing and honoring their contribution, recording their narrative and history as part of Palestinian history, would be an important first step.

What would be a second step?

Fatah projects itself as the main plank of the PLO, which is fine, and the PLO projects itself as the representative of the Arab-Palestinian people. The ANC in South Africa did not just project itself as the representative of the oppressed non-white people of South Africa, but as the democratic alternative of all the people, nonwhite and white. The official statements of Fatah and the PLO say nothing that projects themselves as the democratic alternative to Zionism that would offer a decent future for all. That chapter is missing. One of the reasons I ran for a seat on the Revolutionary Council was to work to

get that missing chapter included.

Was there resistance within Fatah to an Israeli holding a seat on the Revolutionary Council?

People shared with me their reservations on a tactical level having nothing to do with principles. Some people thought my election would complicate Fatah’s dealings with Hamas in Gaza. But that was very much the minority point of view. Palestinians in general applauded my victory.

What was the reaction in Israel to your victory?

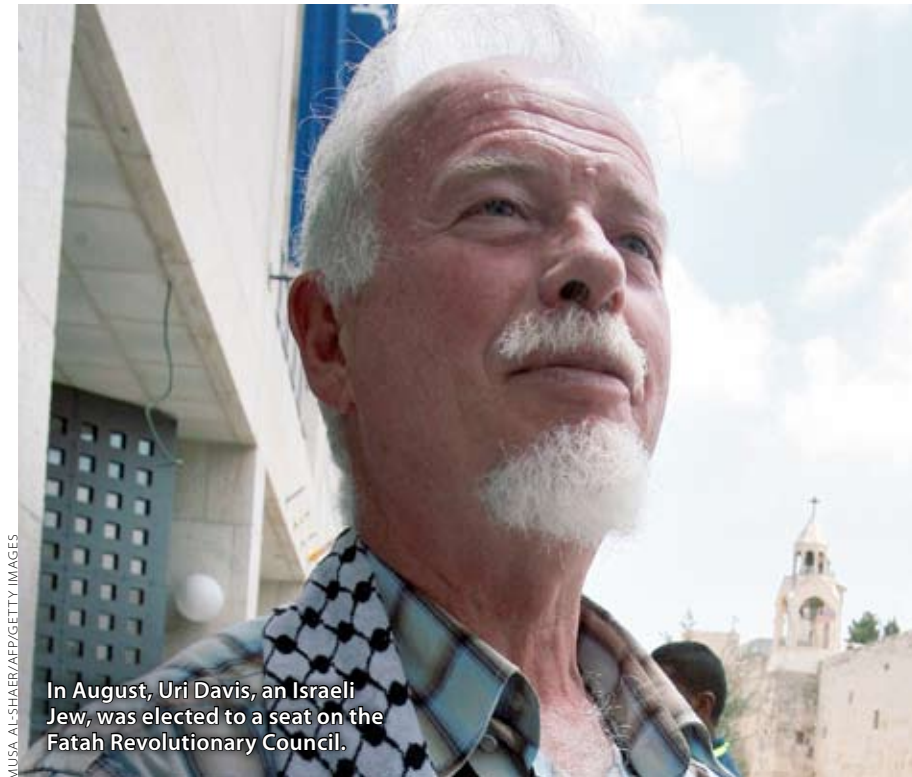
There were the usual angry calls to radio talk shows, but nothing extreme. For a long time, anti-Zionists like myself and I were regarded as pariahs or as the devil incarnate. Decades later, strangely enough, we are regarded by some as celebrities, and even respected, the way one might respect daring bank robbers.

Decades later, young Israelis are crossing over into the West Bank to demonstrate alongside Palestinians in places like Bilin and Nilin.

It’s gratifying to see the pioneering work of a handful of us, begun in the early ’60s, come to fruition four decades later. It is a direct result of the false Zionist narrative and repressive actions following the post-’67 colonization. More and more young people are being motivated to put their bodies where their minds are.

Tell me about your political origins. Many Israeli activists were radicalized by their experiences as soldiers in the occupied territories.

My experience was different. I was a member of the Israeli branch of War Resisters International. I refused to do military service. I was opposed to all of Israel’s wars, including the Six Day War in 1967, on pacifist grounds. In 1965, I



MUSA AL-SHAER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

In August, Uri Davis, an Israeli Jew, was elected to a seat on the Fatah Revolutionary Council.

stood trial in a military court in Nazareth for leading protests against Israel's confiscation of 5,500 dunams [approximately 1,360 acres] of Palestinian land from three villages in the Galilee. I was sentenced to eight months in jail. I broke with pacifism in the mid-'70s, when I was a student at the New School in New York, studying for my Ph.D. in anthropology.

What caused the break?

I realized that basic patterns of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were analogous to the settler-colonial conflicts of North Africa, South Africa and Indonesia. I realized that armed resistance directed against soldiers and settlers, as in the case of South Africa and Algeria, were legitimate under international law. I moved from ideological pacifism to a position of anti-militarism, and I resigned from War Resisters International.

How did you become a member of Fatah?

From 1976 to 1984, I divided my time between teaching at the University of Bradford in the U.K. and returning to Palestine and Israel, where I was deeply involved in Palestine solidarity and human rights activity. I was a well-known activist by then. In 1984, I was invited to Tunis by Abu Ji-

had [a Fatah founder and military leader] to meet with him and Yasser Arafat. I was recommended for membership in Fatah. I was invited by Arafat to attend a conference of the Palestine National Council in Amman, and I was made a member of the Palestine Council. Abu Jihad at that time developed a front known as the Western Front ["western" meaning west of the River Jordan]. It consisted of military and political activities inside Israel. I had nothing to do with the military activities, but I took part in the political activities.

So, would your career as a resister have been entirely different were it not for Abu Jihad?

I would probably have remained within the anti-Zionist and Palestinian solidarity movement inside Israel and Europe.

Was it Fatah's policy to recruit anti-Zionist Jewish Israelis?

I don't know if it was Fatah's policy or not, but I should point out that I was not the first or the only Jewish member of Fatah. Ilan Halevi preceded me.

When you joined Fatah and the PLO, as an Israeli, you were a member of organizations that were banned by Israel. What was your life like?

My good friend and lawyer, Leah Tse-

mel, urged me to go into exile, which I did. She was afraid I would be subjected to a show trial and given a stiff prison sentence. From the mid-'80s to the mid-'90s, I was the head of the PLO's London Bureau.

Didn't that expose you to great danger?

There was never any physical violence against me.

I notice how hopeful you sound when you speak of the ANC's ultimate success at winning over white Afrikaners, and the possibility of Fatah somehow having similar success with Israeli Jews. Isn't it risky to draw such a parallel?

No. I don't see, relatively speaking, where the Jews of Israel are more resistant than the Afrikaners were. Mandela was released in 1990, and four years later he beat DeKlerk also in the white constituencies. The transition from the mainstream being pro-apartheid to the mainstream departing from apartheid did not take all that long.

But in the context of this conflict, there is no dramatic figure like Mandela whose release from prison can stir radical self-questioning and change among Jewish Israelis.

That is true.

In his talk at the Fatah Congress in Bethlehem, President Abbas seemed to try very hard to be balanced, espousing nonviolent resistance and diplomacy with regards to a situation on the ground that is very imbalanced, with the Israelis calling the shots, and the Palestinians always on the defensive. What was your reaction?

I thought Abbas' reference to all legitimate forms of resistance, including armed resistance, was made in full awareness of the imbalance of the conflict. It was reminding the audience, and all concerned parties in the Middle East and abroad, that international law, with regards to occupation, allows people who are occupied the right to resist politically and diplomatically, and also through armed struggle. It is up to the leaders of Fatah to decide which combination is to be used at any given time. The Israelis misinterpreted this to mean that Fatah was opting for armed struggle as the next stage. That is not what our congress opted for. But it is our right. ■



BY JEREMY RIFKIN

Are Millennials Cursed?

For years critics have feared that while the Internet connected more people in networks, the new social affiliations would be less intimate and more superficial than those garnered in traditional face-to-face social discourse. But contrary to the

idea that spending time in cyberspace further isolates individuals in a technologically mediated world, studies show just the opposite to be the case, at least for a majority of people.

Katelyn McKenna, a New York University psychology professor, found that “the more people express facets of the self on the Internet that they cannot or do not express in other areas of life, the more likely they are to form strong attachments to those they meet on the Internet.”

Yet, the same communications technology revolution that is paving the way toward global consciousness has a dark side that could derail the journey, sidetracking the Internet generation into a dead-end corridor of rampant narcissism, endless voyeurism

and overwhelming ennui.

The Internet has the power to inflate and amplify each person’s desire for recognition. For the narcissistically predisposed, the opportunity to exhibit themselves is as seductive as is the inclination of the voyeuristic to watch. In a commercial world that increasingly plays off both narcissistic and voyeuristic tendencies, the Internet becomes an unmatched medium to commodify (and then market) every aspect and stage of life.

The rap on today’s Millennial Generation (everyone born after the mid-1970s) is that they are coddled, overexposed and overindulged. They are told they are special and believe that to be the case. Reality TV shows capture the deep yearning among the younger

generation to be “discovered” and become famous, hopefully overnight. Even if they are denied a “role” on reality TV, there are countless other more easily accessible media outlets on the Internet, like YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Flickr.

But the drive for fame reflects a new sense of existential aloneness and a desperate need to be recognized. The desire for fame is often driven by a fear of mortality and the need to gain a fleeting sense of immortality or at least to know that one’s existence is duly noted, recognized and celebrated by millions of others.

Some psychologists and educators believe that a contributing factor to the fame fetish is the self-esteem movement that spread across the country in the ’80s and ’90s and became deeply embedded in child-raising practices and, even more important, in school curricula. The problem is that if people are led to believe they are special and more important than other people, they become less tolerant of others, less willing to brook criticism, less able to manage failures and less able to express empathy to others.

Have we raised a generation of unadulterated narcissists who care only about themselves? The evidence is mixed.

The Millennials are the first generation to have grown up entirely with the Internet and to be fully embedded in social networking. The distributed nature of the new communications technology and the collaborative relationships it spawns are increasingly reflected in the collective psyche of the generation.

Millennials are disposed to give the opinion of each member of a group equal weight, to work collaboratively, and to seek group consensus. Having grown up on the Internet, they are less likely to accept the word of experts and more likely to believe in the combined wisdom of crowds.

They are far more concerned about the planetary environment and especially climate change, and eager to support sustainable as opposed to unregulated growth. They are also more supportive of a larger role by government than older generations. A PBS program in 2007 reported “that 80

percent of Millennials had participated in some kind of community or societal improvement program” in the past year.

This new data is encouraging, but it comes with a disconcerting caveat; although the connectivity made possible by the Internet is bringing the Millennial

net connectivity provides the human race with boundless knowledge and channels of communication, but the nature of the medium and how it is used might dramatically lessen the ability of human beings to express themselves in ways that advance common understandings, shared mean-

New data is encouraging, but comes with a caveat; the Internet may be seriously eroding the ability of the Millennial Generation to communicate intelligently among themselves.

Generation together in a global cosmopolitan embrace, the same technology may be seriously eroding the ability of the current generation to communicate intelligently among themselves.

Surveys over the past 10 years show an alarming trend amongst the young growing up in front of the screen. Vocabulary is plummeting and, along with it, reading proficiency and the ability to communicate effectively, all of which has far-reaching implications for the ability of people to empathize with one another. According to Mark Bauerlein, an Emory University English professor, electronic media differ from conventional print media like newspapers and adult books in the number of “rare” words commonly encountered. Rare words are those “words that do not rank in the top 10,000 in terms of frequency of usage.” For example, the average newspaper contains 68.3 rare words per 1,000. By contrast, prime-time adult television shows contain only 22.7 rare words per thousand words uttered.

In every previous communication revolution in history, from oral to script to print, vocabulary increased, giving people a richer reservoir of metaphors and language constructions to build on. More extensive vocabulary allows people to create more complex thoughts and, by so doing, expand the empathic domain, for the obvious reason that people can better express their innermost feelings, intentions and expectations to one another.

We face yet another paradox of the present moment in history: the new Inter-

ings, and empathic connections.

The situation at present is anything but clear. But the likely reality is that a younger generation is growing up torn between both a narcissistic and empathic mindset, with some attracted to one and some to the other.

The long-term economic downturn facing the global economy as the Second Industrial Revolution moves toward a sunset will probably weaken the narcissist impulse, as personal and collective survival looms ever larger and individual illusions of grandeur amid global chaos come to be regarded as delusional, even comic. A collective narcissism could, however, just as easily be transformed into a virulent xenophobia, with political diatribes aimed at characterizing minorities and other cultures and nationalities as inferior and less than human. It’s happened before.

Troubled times could also lead to an extension of empathic consciousness—“we’re all in this together”—as we heighten our sensitivity to each other’s common plight.

Much will depend on our ability to speed along a new Third Industrial Revolution that brings out our collaborative nature, is motivated by a sense of the common good, and is expressed through a new dream of quality of life and planetary sustainability. ■

This essay was adapted from The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World of Crisis by Jeremy Rifkin (Tarcher Penguin).

COMEDY

Finding Comedy in the Muslim World

By Maysan Haydar

IN THE 2006 film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, Albert Brooks plays an American sent by his government to find out what makes Muslims in South Asia laugh. Brooks' character was woefully unsuccessful, but the growing popularity of a comedy festival in Amman, Jordan, would indicate that maybe he was just looking in the wrong place.

The Amman Stand-Up Comedy Festival, which just completed its second run in December, featured comedians performing in both English and Arabic, though most of the talent came from Western countries.

Comedy, of course, is not new to the Middle East, despite the pervasive stereotype of a humorless people. Traditionally, Arab comedy has taken the form of sketch shows or theatrical performances, especially popular on television during the holy month of Ramadan, the Middle East's equivalent to sweeps week. "We're not taking credit for comedy or a sense of humor," says Dean Obeidallah, executive producer of the Amman festival and co-creator of the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival.

Stand-up comedy, however, is new to the region, and wildly popular with young audiences. In its first year, the four-night festival sold out so quickly, organizers added a fifth night. The 2009 festival sold out all of its seven nights, and Obeidallah says Amman's mayor, Omar Maani, is now considering doubling the event's length and moving the festival to a warmer month to take advantage of larger outdoor venues.

The Amman series came about after Maani approached Obeidallah about creating an event similar to the New York festival. The New Jersey native says the show works for both Arab and non-Arab audiences: "It's great for the community and it's great to show ... we've got a sense of humor."



Comedian Maysoon Zayid performs onstage at the Amman Stand-Up Comedy Festival.

As common comedic topics like sex and politics would seem to be off limits in the Middle East, the obvious question is: What are Arabs laughing at? Obeidallah says that although comics who perform clean material are more likely to be successful in the more reserved culture, there are no specific objections to types of jokes. Performers adopt a common-sense strategy to political material, he says: "Don't make fun of the leaders by name, but make a broad-stroke joke." (Unless you're making fun of American policies; Bush was a very popular subject, Obeidallah notes.)

As the festival grows, Obeidallah hopes it will mature into an educational project for getting people on stage and into comedy productions: "So much of the goal of the festival is beyond entertainment," he says. "It's education about the business." The festival featured daytime stand-up workshops.

To encourage local talent, organizers auditioned 20 performers for spots in the festival, eventually offering three spots in the show. Of the festival's seven nights, two featured Arabic-speaking comedians and seemed to draw an older, more conservative crowd—though Obeidallah says audience members laughed as hard as audiences on the English-only nights.

Obeidallah became an Arab-American comedy emissary by accident. The New Jersey product of a Palestinian father and Sicilian mother, he never thought of himself as Arab until after 9/11. A trained lawyer who had planned on going into public service, Obeidallah finds comedy more satisfying. "The beauty of comedy is you're sort of a politician in a way, in a good sense. [But] with us it's much more pure, our motivations aren't questioned in the same way. And [this is] much more fulfilling than regular stand-up; if I were just talking about dating and Starbucks, I'd be losing my mind."

Comedian Maysoon Zayid, the other co-creator of the New York festival, has similar dual intentions. A Palestinian with cerebral palsy, she jokes that she is the "most oppressed person on earth," but her comedy work significantly funds her charity, Maysoon's Kids, which pays for education and accessibility equipment for disabled children in Palestine. She performed in Amman in both English and Arabic, and credits her ability to flawlessly switch between the two for her success with both audiences.

Asked how the patriarchal Middle East reacts to her performance, she says, "The world of comedy is machismo. Regardless of where they are in the world,

women are the underdog. The assumption is, women aren't as funny. I think I'm blessed as an Arab comic, because I'm the only one who can do what I do."

The challenge of switching between the languages is not about the content of jokes, Zayid says, but the pace of their delivery. "I would much rather do stand-up in Arabic because of the musicality of the language. It's a much faster clip than English," she says. "I'm setting them up and knocking them down. What takes me five minutes in English takes me two in Arabic."

So, what does make Arabs laugh? "Fam-ily material," Zayid says. "Talking about my dad kills, kills, kills!"

Obeidallah believes the Middle East will eventually become just another place for comedians to include on tours. "I can't tell you how many times I've been approached by comics who want to be considered for the festival. People that go there and perform come back and tell [other comedians] how great it is." ■

BOOKS

A Military Murder

By Kari Lydersen

ON DECEMBER 13, Army Sgt. Lanny Davis, a retired Vietnam vet, died.

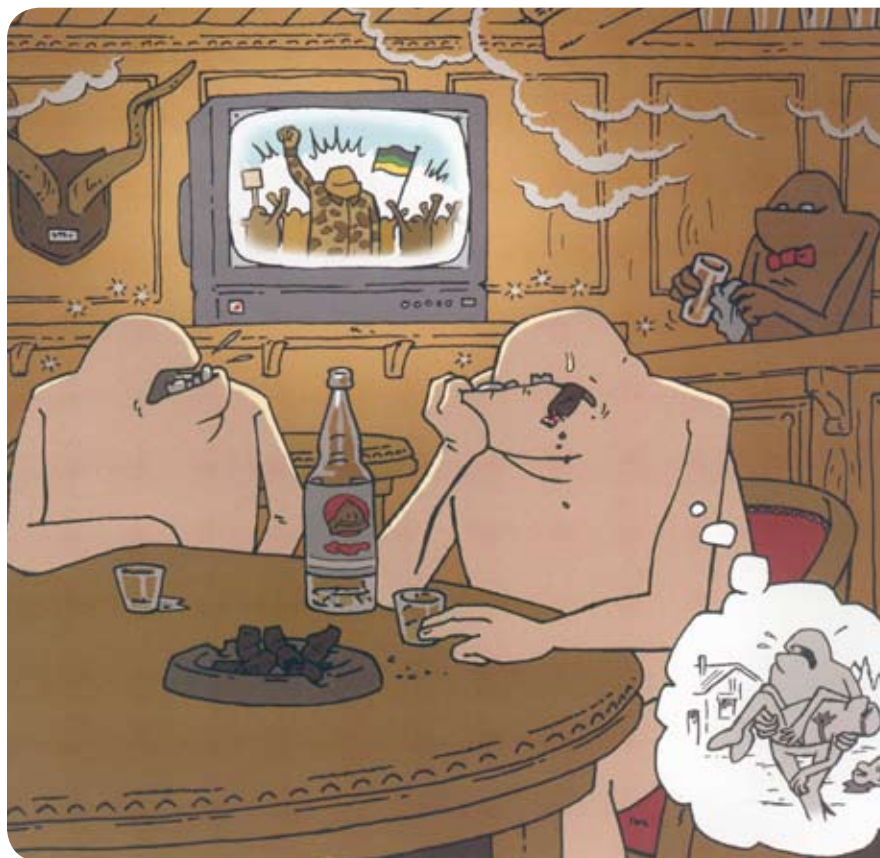
But those who knew and loved him say a big part of Davis died six years earlier, when his only son Richard was murdered at Fort Benning, Ga.—just days after returning from Iraq, and before he had even seen his parents. Richard's body was found in a field near the base—dis-membered, burned to a crisp, with jagged holes in his skull and teeth knocked out. Four of his fellow soldiers were charged.

A fictionalized account of Davis' mysterious murder is given in the 2007 movie *In the Valley of Elah*. In *Murder in Baker Company: How Four American Soldiers Killed One of their Own* (Chicago Review Press, February 2010), Georgian author

Cilla McCain tells the true story. She answers many of the questions raised by the movie, and clears up the queries that commonly run through viewers' minds during films based on true stories: "Did that part really happen?" In this case, the most shocking and disturbing events did indeed occur.

McCain does not prove, or even posit, exactly who murdered Davis, and why. But through this story she sheds light on the U.S. military's disturbing practice of covering up murders and other noncombat-related deaths among troops, ignoring post-traumatic stress disorders, and allowing predators and dysfunctional systems to continue to victimize others. Unlike the movie, McCain develops the characters of the four soldiers accused of Richard's murder, showing the debilitating, frightening and sometimes contradictory effects war and military culture can have on impressionable, insecure and potentially aggressive young men.

[art space]



A WORLD WITHOUT WORDS

Is history nothing but a comical parade of conflict, greed and folly? An ambitious and witty new graphic novel says just that—without one word, and in less than 100 pages. In *Speechless: World History Without Words* (December 2009, New Internationalist), cartoonist Polyp satirizes humanity, drawing "progress" as a modern delusion that masks the same old myopic and unjust power plays. His absurdist rendering of people—as eyeless, earless Cro-Magnon-like creatures—entertains, and perhaps even comforts: The distance between the Stone Age and Information Age is not so great after all. To Polyps, humanity never changes—it just finds new ways of being the same.

Speechless is available at bookstores nationwide.

—Jeremy Gantz



Despite exhaustive reporting by McCain, it is hard to get a clear picture of Richard Davis. Was he inquisitive, loving and something of an awkward outcast, as anecdotes and testimonials suggest? Or was he a bigoted aggressor who harassed strippers and tortured Iraqi prisoners, as others say? Chances are he was a combination of all these qualities and more, a mass of contradictions like many young men thrown at an early age into the horror of war.

McCain follows the twists and turns of Davis' murder and the ensuing investigation, subtly making larger points about a brutal and intentionally obfuscatory military culture.

The most stirring character in the story is Richard's father, Lanny, a lifelong patriot who swelled with pride as his son followed in his footsteps, striving to live up to his father's expectations. It is painful to read how Lanny begins to realize he has lost not only his son but his faith in the country and system to which he dedicated his life.

As military brass repeatedly disrespect, ignore and deceive Lanny, he takes it upon himself to investigate his son's murder. But each answer seems to trigger more questions. As we get a clearer picture of the four men who were likely parties to the killing, we see that at least two of them are in some ways victims themselves—of both the effects of war and socio-economic factors beyond their control. As with prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib and other atrocities in recent wars, perpetrators were served a modicum of justice while higher-ups who allowed, or even ordered, the behavior got off scot-free. (There's no indication that higher-ranking officers were party to Davis' murder, but McCain finds that officers cavalierly ignored threats toward Davis and general signs that mentally unstable troops under their command were prone to wanton violence.)

Ultimately, was Davis' murder a drunken, spontaneous and meaningless act by young men who were themselves scarred by war, including their company's participation in the April 2003 Midtown Massacre in Baghdad, where U.S. troops gunned down more than 100 supposed enemy

MEASURING YOUNG WOMEN'S WORTH

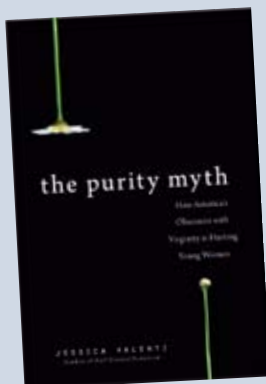
In The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women (Seal, January) Jessica Valenti, the founder and editor of Feministing.com, explores America's "cult of virginity."

Viewing virginity as a commodity—as it was seen back in the days in which daughters were exchanged as property—lives on ... Take, for example, Virginity Vouchers. ... Sold to abstinence educators as abstinence commitment cards to hand out to students, these vouchers, which look much like credit cards, feature a background image of a bride and groom with the words "Virginity Voucher: Don't buy the lie, save sex for marriage" ...

And, of course, there are purity balls—the federally funded father/daughter dances where girls as young as age six pledge their virginity to their dads, who in turn pledge to hang on to said virginity until an appropriate husband comes along, to whom the fathers can transfer ownership of their daughters. ...

Sex-as-dirty and women-as-tainted messages are central to the virginity movement and are perpetuated most visibly in ... our schools. ... A teacher

holds up a clear strip of [Scotch Tape], meant to represent a girl, in front of a class. The teacher then puts the strip of tape, adhesive side down, on the arm of a boy in the class, to symbolize his sexual relationship with the girl. The teacher rips off the tape (signifying the breakup, apparently) and holds it up again for the class to look at. Students are meant to see that the strip of tape—the girl—has picked up all kinds of dirt and hair from the boy's arm and is no longer clean. Then, when the teacher tries to stick the same strip of tape to another boy's arm, he or she notes that it doesn't stick—they can't bond!



combatants, many of them unarmed and likely civilians? Was it the culmination of a personal feud? Could there be any connection to the murder and the military's attempts to cover up the horrific details of the Midtown Massacre and other incidents in Iraq? Is it significant that Richard's phone calls to Lanny from Iraq, as he pleaded for help and described appalling conditions, were cut off mid-conversation?

McCain notes that she was motivated to take on this story partly by the memory of her uncle, a veteran and son of a veteran, who was severely beaten by military police officers in a bar near Fort Benning shortly after returning from Vietnam. As a young girl, she was shocked by the realization that officers were abusing their power, in this case attacking her uncle because he

looked like a hippie.

Murder in Baker Company is more than just an impressive true-crime narrative, as McCain developed both a deep respect for Lanny Davis and a sense of responsibility to troops and veterans like him who have been neglected and betrayed after sacrificing so much.

"Issues of crime, gang violence, rape, mental illness and war atrocities surround Richard's tragic murder and others like it," McCain writes. "Like Lanny Davis, a patriotic man who devoted his entire life to the service of our country and lost not only his beloved child but also the faith and trust he once proudly displayed in the military system and America in general, some U.S. soldiers are finding the very foundation of their beliefs crumbling to dust." ■

Salim on WVON

Continued from back page

"Hello, this is Alice. What I want to say is, I can't understand why so many black men hate Oprah. It is ridiculous."

"I understand what you're saying," I reply. "She's so successful. She's an easy target. But then, she focuses a lot of her criticism on black men in ways some men think aren't useful to them. I don't particularly agree with that critique, but that is what people say about her."

These days, when the most successful radio hosts are usually insulting and abrasive, it's the rare show that attempts to respect callers. I try to build an audience by challenging people's views without dismissing or belittling their arguments.

Some media theorists say I have it all wrong, that right-wing radio attracts a large audience because it eschews nuance and context. They may be right. But I think the future of our nation depends on them being wrong.

Across the spectrum—and beyond

Chicago's WVON is one of the few stations in Chicago featuring a steady diet of progressive fare, though it does attempt to provide ideological balance by broadcasting conservative commentator Charles Butler's evening show every weeknight.

Though many callers express views that could easily be called conservative, most are progressive, at least nominally. Many strongly support single-payer healthcare, and strengthening the social safety net in general.

I have regular callers who are convinced that white America has black genocide on its agenda. Their mistrust is deep; some of it can be attributed to familial links to the South and its tradition of overt and brutal racism. Even a black president can't dislodge that kind of generational mistrust.

Anti-immigration sentiments are common; "they're being imported to take our jobs," is a typical complaint. My arguments to the contrary have changed some minds, but others stubbornly hold their position. I keep trying.

The traditional right-left political spec-

trum doesn't quite apply here. I've spoken to a left-leaning black nationalist who supports a healthcare "public option," but opposes abortion as ardently as any right-to-lifer. I've debated dedicated union members who agree with white Minutemen that undocumented workers should be summarily deported. I have a regular caller who grew up in an orphanage but

of St. Sabina Church, a fiery Catholic priest and social activist who happens to be white, gained some media attention for his mocking portrayal of candidate Hillary Clinton.

This rich ideological landscape accounts for a dizzying array of ideas and emotions in the black community, a discourse that finds expression on WVON.

Callers' mistrust of white America is deep; some of it can be attributed to many listeners' familial links to the South and its tradition of overt and brutal racism.

now runs an inner-city boxing club that mentors and counsels youth. He is a Mormon.

Yes, the station's target audience is a bit older than the youthful demographic coveted by commercial music stations, but WVON does attract some young listeners. One of my regular callers is Rhymefest, the 32-year-old Chicago rapper who co-wrote Kanye West's popular 2004 song "Jesus Walks."

The black metropolis

Context is crucial to understanding this politically complex community of listeners and callers.

Chicago is home to the largest black nationalist groups in the nation, including Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam and the National Black United Front. The city is also a center of progressive activism; the Black Radical Congress, a near-defunct grouping of progressive black activists, academics and journalists, was born here. Additionally, the Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition (formerly Operation PUSH) is Chicago-based and still fighting the good fight as an advocate for the poor and a clearinghouse for much needed social services.

And the city is home to a number of large black churches and an influential corps of clergymen, including two who gained national exposure during Obama's presidential campaign. The infamous Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ married and ministered to the Obama family. Father Michael Pfleger

The station has a well-earned reputation for organizing grievances and bringing energy to political movements; it was the 2002 winner of the coveted Studs Terkel Award from Chicago's Community Media Workshop—the only media outlet ever to win the award.

Originally a music station owned by Phil and Leonard Chess (of the legendary Chess Records), WVON went to an all-talk format in 1986, in the midst of the re-election campaign of Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor. The station played a major role in Washington's two trailblazing elections and has been an influential voice in black Chicago politics ever since.

Today, three years after WVON upgraded its signal strength and began broadcasting 24-7, Chicago's black political elite and the city's most mobilized black voters are regular listeners. Illinois politicians from both parties avidly seek interviews with the station's drive-time hosts.

In a media environment cluttered with right-wing rants and polarizing pundits—or mainstream outlets that mostly ignore black America altogether—WVON offers a bracing, complex alternative. Instead of false ideological symmetry, you get a complex reflection of a people still struggling with a legacy of exclusion, but looking toward an empowered future. You get a radio station with enormous potential. ■

"The Salim Muwakkil Show" can be web-streamed live at www.WVON.com, on Saturdays from 7 to 10 p.m.



BY SALIM MUWAKKIL

GOOD EVENING, YOU'RE TALKING to Salim Muwakkil on 1690 WVON. What's on your mind?" I ask.

"The election of Barack Obama is the worst thing to ever happen to black people in America," the caller snarls. "He's a perfect Trojan Horse for American imperialism and corporate control. What do you think?"

That kind of question is typical fare on "The Salim Muwakkil Show," broadcast every Saturday night by Chicago's only black-owned radio station. These days, one year after the nation's first black president took office, callers make it clear that African-Americans are divided sharply on Obama's performance.

Most are reluctant to criticize a man who inherited massive economic and military morasses from his predecessor—and who is, like them, both black and from Chicago. But others, like the caller quoted above, blame Obama for offering cover to the U.S. war machine. This critical perspective was asserted by a group called the "Black is Back Coalition," which organized a November

rally and march in Washington, D.C., to protest the foreign and domestic direction of the Obama administration.

Many callers reflect black Americans' general unease with military adventures and their wariness of escalating hostilities in Afghanistan. But few are willing to join groups like the Black is Back Coalition—yet.

As a writer concerned with the state of black America, my experience as a WVON-AM talk show host provides me with an organic link to the black community and its most urgent concerns.

In recent months, the topic of youth violence has monopolized discussion on my show. This furor was sparked by the September 28 videotaped fatal beating of 16-year-old student Derrion Albert.

"It's the parents' fault; plain and simple, end of story," one caller says succinctly. Many others agree, blaming the offenders' parents, particularly absent fathers, for failing to provide necessary guidance.

Others call in to defend their heroes.

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ON AIR WITH BLACK AMERICA

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